

## **“Zechariah’s Song”**

*First in a series of messages: “The Songs of Advent”*

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Malachi 2:17-3:1, Luke 1:68-79

Without a doubt one of the greatest gifts of God is music. Can you imagine a world without song? Can you imagine Christmas with no carols?

Song is the highest form of prayer. Music lifts us up into the very presence of God, expressing our joy and love for God in ways that go beyond mere words. Have you noticed how much music there is in scripture? The whole middle portion of our Bible – the psalms – is essentially the church’s song book.

God’s people were always singing God’s praise in response to his mighty deeds. When God successfully led the people of Israel through the Red Sea, their natural response was to get out the tambourines and dance and sing: *“I will sing unto the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously, the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”*

And so it came as no surprise when God came into this world in Jesus that the angels should sing and that all God’s people should erupt in song. In fact, the main characters of the Christmas story were singing advent songs and Christmas carols long before “Joy the World” and “Silent Night” ever came to be. We find their ancient yet ever-relevant songs in the first couple chapters of the Gospel of Luke. The lyrics are there for us to ponder and enjoy. This morning we begin our “concert series” with a look at Zechariah’s song. Then in the next few weeks we’ll take up the songs of John the Baptist, Mary, the Angels, and Simeon.

Let’s set the context for the song composed and sung by a fellow by the name of Zechariah. This song was sung at a particularly dark and gloomy time in Israel’s history. It had been some 400 years since God last spoke to his people through the prophets. The last prophet, Malachi, spoke of the coming of a Messiah who would fulfill Israel’s fondest hopes, saving the faithful and destroying Israel’s enemies. Malachi promised Israel that God was about to act. In fact, at the time he chided the people for their unbelief:

### ***The Day of Judgment***

**<sup>17</sup> You have wearied the LORD with your words.**

**“How have we wearied him?” you ask.**

**By saying, “All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them” or “Where is the God of justice?”**

**3 “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. <sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Mal 2:17–3:1). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

But now, 400 years later, Israel was still under the thumb of its enemies. Caesar Augustus was firmly in control, and Herod, their more immediate ruler, was an evil and degenerate man. Under his leadership, Israel was filled with idol worship and immorality and the Jews had lost their spiritual vitality. They were losing their hope. No messiah seemed forthcoming.

Zechariah, a priest by profession, kept praying for the Messiah to come, but he, too, was losing hope. He seriously wondered if things would ever change. Had God forgotten his promises?

Zechariah may well have wondered about God's follow-through in regard to his own personal misfortune. He was married to a good woman, Elizabeth, but she was unable to bear children, and in that day, to be barren - to be unable to carry on the family line - was a terrible thing. People assumed that you were being punished by God for some sin you must have committed. Zechariah and Elizabeth lived righteous and blameless lives and prayed fervently night and day for a child, but seemingly to no avail. God seemed to have forgotten them. They had stopped hoping long ago. They had grown old together and she was well beyond the child-bearing age. It was a dark and gloomy time.

But then one day, unbelievably good fortune finally came to Zechariah. He won the lottery! As one of 20,000 priests who served in the temple, only very few were able to go into the inner temple area to burn incense and offer prayers for the people. The priests would cast lots for the privilege of serving in this way. It was the dream of every priest to do so - a once in a lifetime opportunity! And Zechariah, (praise be to God!), won that chance. What a privilege! He couldn't be happier!

The big day arrived, and as he entered the altar area to burn incense to the Lord; he was startled by an angel. Zechariah was gripped with fear.

But the angel reassured him:

*"Don't fear, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you. You are to name him John. You're going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you—many will delight in his birth. He'll achieve great stature with God.*

*He'll drink neither wine nor beer. He'll be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment he leaves his mother's womb. He will turn many sons and daughters of Israel back to their God. He will herald God's arrival in the style and strength of Elijah, soften the hearts of parents to children, and kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics—he'll get the people ready for God.*

And how does Zechariah respond to this great and glorious news? With unbelief: *"I can't believe it! How can I be sure of this? Do you know how old we are? You have got to be kidding!"* Zechariah implies that will take some special sign from God if he is going to believe this tall tale (as if a visit from an angel isn't sign enough!). The angel tells him that his son will be a special child who will play an important role in getting the people ready for the coming of the Messiah. But it doesn't register.

Zechariah was so programmed into thinking that life would never change, that the age of miracles had long ceased, that God would never act, he could only respond with cynicism and unbelief: *"Yea – sure! Would that it were true!"*

Zechariah, at this moment, is the representative of all the cynics, skeptics and doubters of our day who have a hard time believing that God is able to break into our world and into our lives at any moment and change things for the better. Many have given up on God altogether and have lost hope in a world that seems always to be spinning out of control.

Isn't true that you and I share in that cynicism at times? How often do we allow this pessimistic tape play in our heads: *"Nothing in life really changes. It's the same ol' same ol.' There is nothing new under the sun..... Why should I bother with God at all? God cares nothing about me or the world. If he did, he would do something... God may have come into the world 2,000 years ago. But that was then and now is now. Where is God? Christmas will come and go and nothing will be different."*

Faith and hope can often be in short supply, even during this advent and Christmas season. Maybe we are more like Zechariah than we would care to admit.

Well, the angel was not too happy to find Zechariah so disbelieving, and didn't hesitate to bring down punishment upon him. *"Because you didn't believe me, Zechariah, you will be silent and unable to speak until these things come true."*

It was the tradition that after a priest took his turn serving in the inner temple, he would come out to bless the people. The crowd outside must have been startled as they saw Zechariah struggling to speak, but nothing coming out of his mouth. No one was more surprised than Zechariah himself.

Being struck dumb seems like a harsh punishment. Actually it seems that Zechariah was not only struck dumb, but deaf as well, for scripture says people communicated with him by signs and obviously, if he could hear, the signs wouldn't have been necessary. In any case, maybe that enforced period of silence (nine months) is exactly what this fellow needed. Maybe it was even a gift from God.

Of course, it didn't seem like that at first. I rather imagine he spent the first several days kicking himself. *"Why didn't I believe God? Why was I so skeptical? How could I have been such a fool?"* But then, in the quiet and in the stillness, he began to think and to pray. He began to read his Bible (the Old Testament) and he gained a new appreciation for God's actions in history. Gradually it all began to make more sense to him. He came to the wonderful conclusion that God *was* active after all! He *was* fulfilling his promises. God *was* speaking again after a lull of 400 years and God spoke to *him*, of all people! And a child born to him would play an important role in the salvation story that was just then coming to a climax. He realized he was living in a stupendously significant time. Zechariah's doubt gave way to faith. What the angel said was true! It took an enforced period of silence for him to come to grips with this amazing news.

Have you ever wondered what it might be like to be unable to speak or to hear a long stretch of time? Maybe you have had to deal with just such a condition. It certainly would be an awful thing for someone

who makes their living speaking! No doubt it would be incredibly frustrating. But I wonder if a lot of good would come from it. I have thought about it myself and wondered, *“What if I couldn’t preach or teach or counsel or talk with friends and family? What if I couldn’t hear the television or listen to the radio?”* I am sure I would read more. I would think more. I would be more self-reflective. I would be seeing more. I would be more observant of people. I would spend more time looking into the eyes of my loved ones and appreciating them more. I would be more attuned the Spirit of God. I would spend more time praying and meditating on God’s Word....I would have less doubt and more faith. I would be less cynical and more hopeful. I would grow spiritually. Not that I would want to be struck dumb and deaf mind you ... but good things could come of it.

It shouldn’t take an angel to force you and me to find some periods of silence and solitude in all our busy-ness, especially during this season of the year. If you want to know the truth, this is probably the most important part of our Christmas preparations. By all means, deck the halls and buy the gifts and bake the cookies. But the real meaning of Christmas comes through in the silence when we stop and think and ponder anew the reality of God’s coming to us in Jesus.

In fact, if you and I fail to carve out some periods of silence and solitude to ponder the ways of God this advent season, the true meaning of Christmas might just pass us by. How does the carol go? *“How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.”*

True to the Lord’s promise, a baby was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. On the eighth day when the child was to be circumcised, the relatives were all set to name him after his father Zechariah. But Elizabeth spoke up and said, *“No! He is to be called John.”* Everyone was puzzled, because the norm was to give the child a family name, and *“John”* was not one of them. They communicated with John using sign language, and after Zechariah scribbled *“John”* on a writing tablet, Zechariah’s mouth was opened and he began to speak, praising God. And what a song he sang!

68 **“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,**  
**because he has come and has redeemed his people.**  
69 **He has raised up a horn**  
**of salvation for us**  
**in the house of his servant David**  
70 **(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),**  
71 **salvation from our enemies**  
**and from the hand of all who hate us—**  
72 **to show mercy to our fathers**  
**and to remember his holy covenant,**  
73 **the oath he swore to our father Abraham:**  
74 **to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,**  
**and to enable us to serve him without fear**  
75 **in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.**  
76 **And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;**  
**for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,**  
77 **to give his people the knowledge of salvation**

**through the forgiveness of their sins,  
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,  
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven  
79 to shine on those living in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”**

In the silence, as Zechariah reflected upon God’s ways, his doubts and his discouragement gave way to faith and hope. Darkness gave way to light. God was active in his world and his life after all! He had to stop long enough to understand it and appreciate it.

Do you wish you had more faith? More hope? More love and Joy? Do you wish you had more of God in your life? Find him in the silence. Find him in the pages of Scripture, find him in the midst of all your struggles and heartaches, for he is Emanuel – “God with us.” Find him knocking at the door of your heart and let him in. And you, like Zechariah, will sing a new song to the Lord, a song of praise like you have never sung before! Amen!