

Hints of Dawn
 Reading from the Old Testament: Malachi 4:2
 Reading from the New Testament: Luke 1:67-80

It had been a rough few months, well, more than a few, nine of them actually. Neither of them had imagined this journey, certainly not when they were young and actually praying for and daydreaming about life together with a child. Like many couples before them, Abraham and Sarah, Rachel and Jacob, Hannah and Elkanah, such dreams had been deferred long enough to fade, their energies redirected toward commitments and tasks that masked the small child-sized hole in their hearts.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were temple nerds, and it would be no surprise if Herod's impressive hilltop Temple in Jerusalem was where they met and courted. In the small world of Southern Presbyterianism, there are these family lines known and respected for producing generation after generation of preachers and Christian educators. In first century Judaism, that would be Elizabeth's family, priestly descendants of Aaron himself, and thus, Temple royalty. Every time someone intoned the liturgical benediction, *The Lord bless you and keep*

you..., you might hear Elizabeth's peers whisper, "That's from Elizabeth's family."

Zechariah was a priest himself, though descended from one of the lesser known Temple clans. They tended to be the worker bees of the temple, faithfully carrying out their assigned duties without much fanfare. There were 24 sections of priests with each group responsible for two separate weeks of service in the Temple, maintaining operations, staffing facilities, ensuring the proper maintenance of worship, parking mules on high holy days.

It was during one of those appointed weeks that Zechariah had the honor and accompanying stress, of entering the highly secure holy place just outside the heart of the Temple, the Holy of Holies which contained the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat, where Yahweh's power and presence was palpable and powerful. Only the high priest could enter there, and him only once a year. But throughout the year, the other priests, selected by the casting of lots, carry out the solemn task of entering the holy place just outside of the Holy of Holies to clean the altar of incense and offer fresh incense.

It was a stressful task. Often, when our acolytes are coming forward to light the candles in the chancel, you'll see their eyes fiercely focused on the flame, fearing it might fail before they get to the candle. They want to get it right. Similarly, Zechariah, his throat suddenly parched, his hands visibly trembling, pulls back the curtain and enters the holy place, hoping not to be the holy screw up who knocks over the lampstand and sets off the fire alarm.

However, behind the curtain is a surprise that will replace his performance anxiety with shock. For inside, standing right there beside the altar of incense, was the angel of the Lord. *Holy %* &# (Let's just say Zechariah was wishing he'd brought a change of underwear)*. Luke says, "When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him." Of course, Luke could have said the same thing after the angel shared his news with Zechariah. "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord ... He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the

hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

"Um, sorry, I think I lost you somewhere around the third word after *bear* ... 'cause it sounded something like ... *son* ... and that couldn't be right because, well, how can I say this? That show left town some time ago."

Up to this point the angel had followed the standard angel script, you know, *Be not afraid, good news, great joy, yada, yada*. But Zechariah's understandable skepticism must have chafed his wing pits, because all of a sudden, the angel rips into Zechariah like Nick Saban into a referee. "You know who you're talking to? I'm Gabriel ... Hello! Gabriel! You know, trumpet, apocalypse, direct line to *The Big Kahuna*. Does that ring a bell? I don't have time for this! I have to catch a flight over to some Podunk town in Galilee to give the same speech to this teenager named Mary. I hope she's more agreeable. In fact, just to ensure you don't ask any more stupid questions, guess what? You're going to be the first monk! Complete silence until it's time for the mohel. Not a hello. Not a goodbye. Not a "Fine, how about you?" Not a yell, snore, guffaw, groan, burp, or bellow!

Well, don't mess with an ill-tempered angel, because both the promise and threat came to pass. Elizabeth was going in for an ultrasound and Zechariah could offer no opinion on anything from the color of the nursery to the cost of the stroller to the whiplash moods of pregnancy. Of course, Zechariah's burden paled in comparison to Elizabeth's. Luke says Elizabeth went into seclusion for five months. Was it the entombment of doctor-ordered bedrest? Or perpetual waves of nausea? Or the hail of twitter and gossip in the town about such a late in life pregnancy? You know, that sideways snark that always ends with *Bless her heart*.

It was a rough ride, such that you couldn't blame Elizabeth if she felt like kicking the first person to suggest that the hard work comes when the baby is born.

Well, the baby was born and after the flood of suggestions they had never solicited from the town folks, they followed the angel's instruction and named their newborn son, John. Zechariah wasn't going to risk ticking off the angel again. No tellin' what might fall off.

However, the angel was true to his word and Zechariah's sentence of silence came to an end. After such a chaotic, roller-coaster of a ride for nine months, I'd expect Zechariah's first words to be something like, "Listen Liz, no fooling, it wasn't me that left the toilet seat up the night you fell in! Ask your father. He's the one getting up three times a night." It was five months ago, but Zechariah had been fuming about it from the moment he was accused.

No, Zechariah's first words didn't address pent up frustrations or the injustice of the prolonged incarceration of his vocal cords. Yet, Zechariah had plenty to say, and in spite of the marathon mothballing of his tongue, he didn't stutter, stammer, slur, scramble for words, mangle the grammar, or proffer the malaprop. Rather, Zechariah was effusive, eloquent, his words hymnic, even poetic, evoking images and themes that inspire hope and lift spirits heavenward.

After nine months of silence, Zechariah's first words to Elizabeth, to his neighbors, friends, and antagonists, to his God, and to his newborn son constitute an act of praise. "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, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through

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

Perhaps the hidden blessing of that sojourn of silence was providing Zechariah the space to fully process that unsettling encounter with Gabriel in the Temple’s holy place. When he exited that curtained inner sanctum, reeking of incense after spilling it all over himself at the sight of the angel and surrounded by the prying eyes and snooping minds of half the town, Zechariah was overwhelmed and thrust into that space between embarrassment and humiliation. It took time to get over that, at least to a point that he could finally reflect on the angel’s actual message that day.

But now, he understood the poignancy packed in the promise. In spite of life’s chaos and complexity, surprises and catastrophes, detours, mountains, and valleys, good news was coming and his son, his all-too-late-in-life-son, would emcee its introduction. Salvation, forgiveness, given, not earned. “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in

the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." What a beautiful image! What glorious good news! No matter the darkness that may envelop us, the dawn will come, hints of light already can be discerned by attentive eyes.

For a majority of the year, I'm running in the dark, not metaphorically mind you, literally. Of late, it's been early enough that I'm not seeing any signs of activity in the houses I pass, their windows still darkened. Pretty much, it's just me and the neighborhood deer.

As I escape the reach of one streetlight and before I step into the reach the next, I am offered the rare urban opportunity to see the stars twinkling overhead. Without fail, accompanying the cosmic display is the steady stream of headlights directing planes to their landing at Charlotte Douglas. Even when cloudy, you'll see them sneaking through the overcast sky.

Occasionally, it strikes me that, unlike most flights, these planes may not be packed to comic proportions. They could be relatively empty, their mission being to get planes and flight crews to Charlotte's chaotic hub in order to accommodate the hordes of travelers that throughout

the coming day will be buzzing through the busy airport in search of their connecting flights. It's dark, the city is still asleep, but those lights and the dull roar of their decelerating engines tell me that those flight crews up there know the dawn is coming and they are up there preparing for the buzz of another dawning day in America.

That was John's task. His father's poetic hymn wasn't the doting helicopter dad exaggerating the genius of his offspring. Zechariah already understood what that other John's gospel would declare about his son. "He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

God is faithful. Though dark days may ruthlessly dog you, the dawn is coming. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." Christ is the dawn to which John would point, the fulfillment of the promises God made to Abraham and Sarah, the salvation of the world.

You know what the name Zechariah literally means? God remembered. So, in essence, the sojourn of silence and the sight of his newborn son had led Zechariah to claim the meaning of his own name. Dear Christians, can we do the same? You know, when you place the literal meanings of the names Zechariah and Jesus together what you have is God remembers, God saves. And Zechariah's newborn son would link the two. So now we can understand how it came to pass that when a mute new father's tongue was finally untied, his first words were an explosion of praise and a celebration of the link between the God who remembers and the God who saves. Amen.