

Sacred People

The Story of Zechariah, from Luke 1

We just read very small story in Chapter 1 of the Gospel of Luke, about a character we don't pay much attention to at Christmas. But think about it: as Luke sat down to write the story of this person he believed with all his heart had come to change *everything* in the world, and he wondered, as all writers do, "How shall I begin?", this is the story he told first. So I'm curious: what is there in this story that sets the tone for the entrance of God into life on earth?

Zechariah is the father of John the Baptist. But this story begins before the birth of this child. Zechariah is a priest. A very old priest, and he has been doing his duty in the Temple for a very long time. Long enough that he'd forgotten that there used to be a mystical, magical quality to this work. When he was young, he hoped that somewhere in the chanting and the incense and the rituals, something would happen that felt like the presence of God. But it never happened in quite the way he expected, and now Zechariah is just going through the motions, doing what he knows how to do, not even wondering any more whether this is the right job for him, or whether there's some deeper purpose for his life that he hasn't figured out yet.

He knows what he will find when he goes home tonight, too. Elizabeth, his wife, who used to be a beauty. But she is long past the point of mustering up any excitement to see him. She's been worn down by life, that for her included decades of trying to get pregnant, visiting doctors and psychics to find out why she wasn't, fending off all those questions from neighbors and family members who thought they were being helpful.

On the day this story begins, Zechariah is in the very center space of the Temple, the place reserved for offering incense. Incense was supposed to carry the prayers of the people directly to God. This ritual was intended to be so quiet, so intense, that only one priest at a time, once a year, was designated to do it, so that no one could mess up its holiness. This moment was the high point of the Temple worship; the Holy of Holies, where Zechariah would stand, was the most sacred spot in the Temple, which meant it was the most sacred place on earth.

But as he entered the space that morning, Zechariah felt...nothing. He was only there because it was his turn. Do you know that feeling? A non-feeling, actually, a numbness, that even in the middle of something that's supposed to be powerful and moving, can fall over you like a thick cloth, so that it's hard to see, much less to reach out toward, light and connection?

So that morning Zechariah just did what he was supposed to do; he went through the motions. He had memorized the words; he knew how to light the candles and sprinkle the incense. As he chanted the words to hymns he had sung a thousand times before, his mind wandered. He remembered he had to stop at the grocery store on his way home to pick up orange juice.

And then something happened. In that space where there was no person but him, Zechariah felt another presence. Maybe he even saw something move, right in front of him. "Do not be afraid, Zechariah" the angel said (which is how angels always begin). "God has heard your prayers,

your years of unanswered prayers, for a child. Your wife Elizabeth will have a son. He will be a different sort of child, special, a blessing not only to you but to the whole world. His name will be John.” And it’s true: Zechariah and Elizabeth *had* prayed, for *years*, for a child. So long that by now they had stopped praying. Maybe even stopped believing that anyone heard those prayers.

When the angel spoke to him, Zechariah couldn’t help letting his doubts seep in. “I’m old,” he said. “Elizabeth is old. We’ve been disappointed before. I don’t know who you are or where you’ve been all these years, but I’m not sure I want to invest myself in some promise like this again.” Even in the most sacred and powerful place on earth, with something that might be an angel standing right in front of him, Zechariah can’t let go of what he knows about himself: he is a childless man, part of a childless couple. This angel was reviving a dream that he long ago learned not to reach for.

I bet you know the next part of this story. The angel strikes Zechariah mute; he will not be able to speak, or hear, for nine months—until he can see for himself that the promise was true. If you’ve heard this story before, maybe you’ve wondered, as I have, at why that angel was so harsh with Zechariah. It shouldn’t be a sin to doubt, to be realistic! There are other stories of people in the Bible who said much cheekier things to God than Zechariah did!

But I’m thinking maybe the silence the angel installed around Zechariah wasn’t punishment, but a strange sort of blessing. What if Zechariah was being invited into nine months as a silent observer of the miracle that was just beginning, and that he might wreck it if he kept talking about why it couldn’t be true? What if the silence was a gift, an invitation to Zechariah just to sit with the last words he heard from the angel: “His name will be John.” John, which means in Hebrew, *God is gracious*.

God is gracious. Which means: God sees in you what you cannot see in yourself. God’s gifts to you are not about what you deserve. That’s a voice that could change you, change everything. And that’s what happened for Zechariah.

At the end of this story, Elizabeth gives birth to their miracle child. “Congratulations!” all their friends and family say. “I knew you could do it! You got what you have deserved all along! (because they knew nothing about the angel, of course) Who will you name this baby after? His father? Grandfather?” They turn to Zechariah, who seems not so much proud, as awe-struck by what has happened. What will you name your child? they ask. “His name is John,” Zechariah says. God is gracious.

Zechariah was never the same after that. In those nine months of silence he had learned that what he thought of himself, what he was sure he knew, what he expected of his life, was too small to hold God’s dreams for him. He had seen for himself that holiness, that sometimes looks like an angel, can find you even when you’re not looking up. He had learned that even an old, tired man like him, too accustomed to the reality of his life to expect much more, could be part of bringing something holy to birth.

This is the way Luke begins his story of the good news that came into the world with the birth of Jesus. With the story of a man who had been trapped in his own hopelessness, and who was freed by a silence that felt at first like punishment.

I get Zechariah's first reaction to the angel; don't you? Long before we reach old age, our identity gets set in stone. We have figured out: this is who I am; this is what I deserve from life. For some of us, pride has inflated our self-image a bit; we're waiting for others to see in us what we see in ourselves. For others, shame has made us smaller, convinced us that attention will reveal something we'd do better to keep hidden. Pride and shame: they seem like opposites, but they act the same. Both of them squeeze us into a mold that's no bigger than our imaginations. If it's my pride that motivates me, I'm convinced I can reach my full potential with the gifts and muscle already built into me. I will take that angel's promise and turn it into whatever I can manage on my own. If the lesson my life has taught me is that I shouldn't expect much, I will never believe that angel is talking to me. And most of us carry some odd mix that includes both pride *and* shame. I am Zechariah: waiting for my potential to be noticed, and still I am ready to argue that I'm not the right person when God calls me to live larger.

Sacred people, people who bring a glimpse of holiness into a world that is dying for need of it, aren't born; they aren't self-improved into it; they haven't worked their way into deserving it. They're people who can lay aside their own skepticism, the pride *and* shame that caps our imagination of what God can do with us. They are neither too big nor too small for the work that needs to be done. They're people who have lived through tough, tough times and seen that beyond all reasonable hope and expectations, they have somehow had what they needed to get through. They're people who are open to the possibility that life is *not* frozen in what-it-has-always-been. They—you—can bring hope for the world, because you have seen that even when you are tired, when you have been struck silent, when you wonder if you have anything to offer, a gracious God has come again, inviting you to see, and to hold, the light.