

*Malachi 3:1-4*

*Luke 1: 68-79*

On Tuesday, as word spread of the horrific school shooting in Oxford, like you I was deeply troubled. Once again a disturbed young man brought a gun to school and left devastation — this time close to home. In grief, I turned off the television and sat in silence to lament and calm my anxieties. When we are overwhelmed or traumatized, quieting the voices around us can settle the voices within us. Collectively, that's what we do when we hold a moment of silence – we share our grief, remember, lament. We bring the shards of our souls together.

When something happens that means nothing will ever be the same, we often find ourselves craving silence while we try to digest the trauma. Driving home after the diagnosis of cancer is a silent journey. While the hospice nurse prepares the body, there is quiet. A strange text message on our spouse's phone, or drug paraphernalia in our kid's pants pocket — our first response may be to sink into silence, to hush the rush of anxiety's arrival, to breathe. In the quiet we inhabit the feelings and begin to come to terms so that we can begin to work through it.

For some, silence stays for a longer season. My high school classmate, an accomplished athlete, beat back a horrible cancer for many years until it gained the upper hand. Sure he'd beat it again, he and his wife would consider no other outcome. After his sudden death, she fell silent, walling herself off into despair. Able only to get their kids through the day, she chose to be voiceless to their circle of friends, isolating herself into silence, retreating from their community. Her sense of defeat disabled her from writing an obituary, putting together a service, or even publishing a death announcement. Entering a kind of emotional muteness for nearly a year, she was stuck in a kind of silence that only now is beginning to crack.

When difficulty dawns, spiritual people use silence, not merely to re-center, but also to draw from deeper wells of trust. Unexpected change and loss challenge our faith, maybe even batter it. Turning, listening for God, ceasing our chatter, we gain strength — faith buoyed. The prophet Isaiah said, "In quietness and trust is your strength." In silence, this mute faith can offer us a great, indwelling reassurance that whatever is will not last forever, and whatever is — is in God's hands.

The Bible is full of stories of life-altering moments, traumatic events, and mystical encounters that cause people to choose quiet or fall silent. Our second Sunday of Advent lectionary text takes us to the Gospel of Luke, where, in the months leading up to Bethlehem, we remember the metamorphic messages given to Mary and to

her cousin Elizabeth by the annunciating-angel Gabriel that they are each with child. Their partners, too, are captivated and confounded by the news that they are to become fathers.

The first words of the prophet and priest Zechariah, forever known as John the Baptist's dad, come after a season of being mute. Remember what has preceded his offering is this lovely song, known as the canticle of Zechariah, or the Benedictus, the "Blessed be."

Zechariah and Elizabeth were upper-class members of their Jewish community. She, a descendant of Aaron, and he a privileged priest. Despite their unanswered prayers for a child, they lived righteous, faithful lives, and were resigned to their lot. But while attending to a priestly task in the sanctuary alone, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah with news — these wizened ones would have a child, one filled with the Holy Spirit, tasked with divine purpose; a child chosen to make the way for the Lord who is coming.

Zechariah asked a good question: "How will I know this is so?" Gabriel heard: "Do you expect me to believe this?" Speaking that question was a crime for a priest who believed better, and the angel Gabriel sentenced Zechariah to the slammer of silence for 9 months — until John is born and named at his circumcision. Gabriel renders Zechariah mute. For Mary, who just a short time later will also ask a follow-up question when she is told she's having a baby, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" — not even a slap on the wrist. Her question was rooted in logistics — his question was driven by doubt. Oh the irony — that the curious question of the unmarried teenager is celebrated while the preachy patriarchal pastor is struck silent.

Whether to Gabriel, Zechariah's question was a sign of his faithlessness we cannot know — but the author Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that the sin of Zechariah is not his doubt or disbelief, but his lack of imagination. He's a bit burned out, bummed out — and he's hollowed out of hope. He is the one truly barren. With no vision for a future that might be different, he cannot consider that something new and grace-filled might come along. Taylor writes, "His is the barrenness of all of us who fall into despair because we cannot imagine, or have given up, on a world different from the one that we confront every morning in the newspaper." Stuck in silence, Zechariah was given 9 months for new life to grow in him.

This penalty was steep — days upon days of silence for Zechariah to fashion himself a father. And he'd need all that prep time — for John the Baptist would be a typical pastor's kid — wreaking a bit of havoc, opting for camel hair over seersucker, eating an eccentric diet of locusts and honey over the church potluck casserole. One to go his own way, to leave the usual hereditary path to the priesthood of his father, John is a complex character crucial to Jesus' making a way in the world. He's an acquired taste — he's been compared to Roquefort. But there would be no Jesus without John.

During these mute months, imagine Zechariah. People unable to speak feel left out and misunderstood. Besides facial expressions, hand gestures, and the random writing tablet, Zechariah was forced to listen, to observe, to sit on the side looking in. He could neither participate nor pontificate — both very hard for us pastors. All his senses in service to his aged pregnant wife, his assessment of things augmented by watching his wife's interactions with her cousin, Mary. We soon learn that the pregnant virgin the angel told him would come for a three-month visit. He had a front row seat as John leapt in Elizabeth's womb when Mary arrived. He listened in

to their stories of the angel's instructions to them. Their discussions of what was happening in their bodies, their fears about childbirth and their hopes for child-rearing — he took it all in. Mouth shut, ears open, with his grasp on the scriptures, the Holy Spirit helped him come to understand the fulfillment of God's promises. Having learned all the prophecies, with the story of God's people embedded in him, a vision was taking shape within him of what was to come. These were months of illuminating silence.

When it comes to pass, he speaks — and his first words are these words of praise — praise for this new era dawning, praise for God's keeping His Holy Covenant and fulfilling His promises. Zechariah then voices his prophecy, his vision — singing of the new promises that will come to pass in his child. He prepares them for what is to come. In this, one of the most gorgeous passages in all of scripture, out of his muteness, Zechariah has woven a rich tapestry of biblical images. He points to God's covenant with Abraham, remembers the exodus, honors the stories of King David, and includes stirring images of the dawn breaking on a path to peace, past and future inextricably connected in God's plan. The Canticle of Zechariah, in all of its beauty, shows us what happens when the grace that always and inevitably comes with change and trauma is utilized — transformed and given back.

You see, these nine months were more than a time to take in the trauma of his role and the truth of John's identity and purpose. Rather, this container of time held grace for Zechariah, a grace of God he not only receives, but he also metabolizes in his silence. In the quiet, he metabolizes all the meaning. While he had nothing to say, he discerned what it was that God needed them to hear. John paved the way for Jesus. With praise and prophecy, Zechariah sang the perfect song pointing people beyond his son — to the Savior of us all.

Like Zechariah, we won't be ready for Bethlehem until we quiet our doubts, address our lack of imagination, replenish our hollowed out hope, listen to the stories, and hear the Holy Spirit speaking through them. In Advent, we mute the material and mundane messages so easy to lean on, and instead meditate on the meaning of this story lest we be barren ones on the way Bethlehem. How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.

Grace comes in the quiet. When we stop our speaking and our striving, when we swap our pontificating for pondering — God changes us. You will be made ready to offer what Christ most needs from you — your love, your time, your service, your song. To a world so full of brokenness, so weary with loss — Christ is being born again and again. This surpassing love birthed in Bethlehem needs our help to be made visible and tangible today.

A friend of mine has endured a great amount of loss during the pandemic, heavy and hard stuff. Dealing with change, she was constantly hounded by what needed to be done. The noise of everyone's neediness was

deafening. But in the midst of her traumas, tenderness arrived, strangers and angels showed up, friends and family who brought grace in their presence. When she could settle down, she silenced the voices around her, and retreated into her own life in a way she could manage. She intentionally sought ways to metabolize the grace of God present in those many hard days. With imagination and new energy, she wanted to give back. Her season of sorrow now past, she has begun to sing a new song — with her dedicated service through her church and community groups to those who help the poor, the homeless, the hungry, others hounded by loss. She turned the trauma and tragedy she survived into the tangible love of God for others. And in doing so, even now, she paves the way for the advent of Christ into the lives of those empty of hope who are waiting.

As you prepare to meet Christ at his manger, may this be a time for you, not of trauma, but of transformation, a time for God to fill your barren faith with imagination and hope. In the silence you find, may you metabolize the mystery and meaning into a song of praise and service all your own.