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SERMON

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# Zech's Café

Dr. Jo Forrest



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This Advent we are visiting the four gospels to hear their stories of Jesus' arrival in human history.

A gospel is a kind of story-sermon that was written to be heard. Grounded in the grit of human life, their layered meanings and word play collect us in God's grand sweep of salvation.

Each gospel writer introduces Jesus in a way that invites us, two thousand years later, to consider how and where he meets us today with our *holy imagination*. Holy imagination refers to Spirit-inspired wonder with these stories that change our lives.

Last week, we visited Mark's gospel. His story plunges listeners immediately into the wilderness to introduce us to Jesus, who appears as a mature adult. This gospel concludes by sending Jesus' followers back to that wilderness to find the risen Christ. Mark assures us that in the wilderness of our lives, we too will encounter Jesus.

Today, we turn to the Gospel of Luke. It contains the beloved stories told of Mary's encounter with an angel, her sung *Magnificat*, the perilous trip to Bethlehem, and the shepherds' awe.

Since many of you know these details (if not, you can look forward to hearing them on Christmas Eve) today we turn to one of the supporting characters in Luke's story – Zechariah. The way the incarnation impacts his life exemplifies how our encounter with Jesus will change our lives.

Like others in the first century, Zechariah received his name and profession from his parents and their parents. His inheritance from a long line of priests taught him to serve with distinction. From the most holy of holy places, he recites the scriptures and conducts the rituals.

His wife, Elizabeth, also stands as a paragon of faith.

For decades he's prayed for peace only to have the murderous hand of Herod grow stronger while the Israelites suffer. All that time he also prayed for a son to carry on his life's work. Nothing.

One day at the center of the temple, the angel Gabriel tells him that Elizabeth will bear a son. Over the decades of disappointment, he let his dreams die...so was its fear or skepticism or even cynicism that caused Zechariah to ask, "how could this possibly be"?

Gabriel teaches this grumpy old man a lesson. Throughout the next nine months of Elizabeth's pregnancy, he cannot speak.

The miracle of birth opens Zechariah's lips. And, we hear another of the grand canticles Luke composed. The old man sings. Imagine hearing him sing from center stage with the voice of a distinguished tenor.

*Dear God, we too get caught up in expecting little from you and from our selves. We silence our dreams and get stuck. Send your spirit among us so that we hear Zechariah sing us to believe in your son's power to change our lives. Amen.*

Luke 1:67-79

<sup>67</sup> ...Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

<sup>68</sup> "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

<sup>69</sup> God has raised up a mighty savior for us

in the house of his child David,

<sup>70</sup> as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

<sup>71</sup> that we would be saved from our enemies and

from the hand of all who hate us.

<sup>72</sup> Thus God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors

and has remembered his holy covenant,

<sup>73</sup> the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,

to grant us <sup>74</sup> that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve him without fear, <sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness in his presence all our days.

76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
77 to give his people knowledge of salvation  
by the forgiveness of their sins.  
78 Because of the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
79 to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of  
death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

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For nine months because of his doubt, this *man-of-the-word* – someone who recites Torah – was told to shut up. For nine months, this *man-of-God* – someone who avowed the covenant – was humbled from doubting God that would redeem them. For nine months, Gabriel gave him time to reconsider who he could become because of this savior.

As he watched his wife’s belly grow, Zechariah began to imagine raising his son. And he began to imagine God would deliver them from the tyranny of Rome.

The moment he agrees to name his son, he breaks the family tradition, and his lips are opened. Zechariah praises God. This entire canticle takes its name, *Benedictus*, which comes from the first word and the entire meaning – God is blessing them – all of them.

He sings a song he'd thought impossible: God remembered the oath sworn to their ancestors to rescue them from their enemies.

Zechariah's canticle conveys a sense of wonder that he is a part of it all.

He embraces a life that asks so much more of him than just the way it had been handed to him.

Usually, a coming-of-age story refers to someone on the cusp of adulthood. Think of *The Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or *American Graffiti* as archetypal coming-of-age stories. They trace a character's growth from one worldview, perhaps naive or narrow, to a new level of maturity.

This plotline can be about anyone entering new phases of life or discovering new aspects of their identity, regardless of their age. We never stop growing, we never stop learning.

Zora Neale Hurston, a writer from the Harlem Renaissance penned the masterpiece coming-of-age *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Her main character Janie Crawford finds her voice and value later in life. "There are years that ask questions and years that answer."

This is true.

Sometimes it requires years to resolve persistent questions and bring us to a deeper understanding of ourselves, and community, and possibility. In my own life of moving from one career to another, becoming a wife much later than expected, I know how true it is: “there are years that ask questions and years that answer.”

Gabriel sentencing Zechariah to stop talking is only one aspect of silence in his story. In his time-out, did Zechariah recognize the damage he’d done to himself and the entire community of remaining tight-lipped at the injustices inflicted by Herod?

His authority as a priest gave him a platform to do more than offer the customary rituals. Did he cave to the empire’s version of peace and encourage the Israelites to stop resisting? Zechariah remembered that Pharaoh had promised order if the Israelites obeyed. Then they were enslaved. Rome promised them civilization, but the bloody deaths pointed to savagery.

Coerced silence is never a substitute for peace. All the while he was unable to speak, did it finally dawn upon him of the impact of all those years he kept silent, just going along to get along?

It clicked. God's ongoing story of redeeming people brought Zechariah to imagine God would continue to work through these ordinary people, today. He sings because.

Out of the pain comes healing.

Out of the darkness comes light.

Out of the disappointment hope.

Out of the sorrow comes praise.

Zechariah's song came true. Jesus, "the dawn from on high," breaks upon them to guide the way to peace. Luke tells us that Jesus traveled throughout Galilee to sit at tables of all sorts of wayward travelers.

Jesus spoke the truth shrouded in parables. His story about a Samaritan – someone despised by the Jews – teaches them to make peace with their neighbors. A story about a father racing to forgive the prodigal teaches them to offer grace within the family. Jesus never backs down when others are too intimidated to speak up for God's people.

Luke's gospel invites us to use our *holy imagination* of what Zechariah did in the next phase of his life. Here's my take. Zechariah turns all those years of saying what was expected into years of sharing stories of Jesus' resurrection as God's promise.

He moves out. He leaves the security of the temple's "holy of holies" since he knows that God's spirit spins the world in all places. He opens a little roadside café to offer food for the body and words for the soul. He knows people are hungry.

Because God raised Jesus from the dead, he will never be intimidated to silence again.

He reimagines his soaring canticle into something Willie Nelson might croon with a guitar. He composes a refrain "Blessed be" and "we will serve God without fear" into a catchy tune. His café welcomes travelers. Some might be called rebels or revolutionaries – but they simply speak out for justice.

Courage like his and all the others inspired by the good news of the gospel echo through history.

Take Helmuth Hübener, a teenager in Nazi Germany who distributed anti-Nazi pamphlets after his Jewish friend was *disappeared*. He risked everything, including his life, because he could not stay silent in the face of evil.

Or Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers after witnessing the lies behind the Vietnam War. Facing over 100 years in prison, he spoke anyway. He simply *could not* remain silent about what he had seen and heard.

I think of all the whistle-blowers in corporations and the church who risked careers and retirements because they could no longer stomach unethical or corrupt behavior.

Dr. Mark Bray, a historian at Rutgers, was targeted for teaching the history of fascism and anti-fascism. After receiving death threats, he moved his family overseas. But he's still teaching, still writing, still speaking.

Like Zechariah, we too can get caught up in accepting the limits given to us by others. We too might let fear rob us of our voice, our imagination, and our passions. We too might need to stop and let the words of God sink into our being so that we start speaking up and speaking out.

Zech's Café might be just the place we need to rest ourselves during this Advent. Zechariah doesn't incite rebellion for the sake of revenge or greed. His long life of righteousness brings him to listen. And he will teach us to speak in ways that bring about lasting peace.

**References:**

*Feasting on the Word*, Ed David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor  
(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

This sermon series was inspired by Cynthia Campbell's *Christmas in the Four Gospel Homes* published by Westminster John Knox in 2019. Sermons preached by Rev. Pen Peery of First Presbyterian Church of Charlotte and Rev. Tom Are, Jr. of Fourth Presbyterian in 2024 led me to consider this approach for Advent and each sermon/gospel.





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