



*The Benedictus: The Song Born of Silence*  
*First in the Advent sermon series "The Songs of Advent"*  
*Luke 1:68-79*

*First Sunday of Advent ~ Sunday, December 1st, 2019*  
*First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois*  
*The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel, Jr.*

This morning we will look at one of three of the songs of Advent, Zechariah's song," the blessed", or Benedictus in Latin.

Have you ever noticed how hard it is to find a silent peaceful moment? Or maybe "silent" and "peaceful" are oxymorons to you. It seems that we're afraid of silence, afraid to be alone with our thoughts.

Grocery stores, malls, the zoo, the Shoppes at Grand Prairie, and other outside venues have a backdrop of music. People walk down the street completely oblivious to what's going on around them because they have earbuds as they text on smartphones. While walking in Chicago with my wife a couple of weekends ago I noted how several people who were prime targets for getting mugged because they were so lost to the world around them. At a family restaurant, I saw a family of four not talking to one another but busy texting on their cell phones.

For several years I had a faded copy of the single panel comic "Family Circus" taped to a wall in my office. In it the little girl Dolly was trying to get her father's attention as he read the newspaper. "Listen to me with your eyes," she pleaded.

In first century Israel many people believed that God had been silent for a very long time. But that simply wasn't the case. The people had become complacent. God spoke through the prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Amos and Micah, and the other Old Testament prophets. But Israel grew deaf and ignored their words. At times they even killed the prophets who challenged them to live up to their calling. They chased not only foreign gods but became addicted through distraction. They cast out those who judged them. So God seemed silent but God wasn't really silent. God just couldn't be heard above the din of their own noise. The people had forgotten how to listen.

Enter Zachariah. He was an old man, a priest of many years. He was married to Elizabeth who was a woman beyond childbearing years. Like the patriarch and matriarch Abraham and Sarah, they entered old age childless, a wound beyond measure in the ancient world. Yet, despite this wound, we are told that Zachariah and Elizabeth were “righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord” (v. 6). They were “good people.” Good people are not immune to bad things in a broken world.

When it was Zachariah’s turn to enter into the Temple’s Holy Place to burn incense to the Lord he knew this to be a once in a lifetime opportunity. I imagine that he was nervous. He had probably dreamed of that day, maybe even ached for it, and hoped against hope that he would not “mess it up” somehow.

As he entered into that Holy Place, the Holiest of Holies, something no less profound than Moses’ encounter with the burning bush or Paul’s walk to Damascus occurred. What mystics call “a thin place” occurred. The angel Gabriel, the messenger of God, appeared. A little later in Luke’s story Gabriel appeared to Mary.

Interestingly, Gabriel did not appear to Zachariah’s wife Elizabeth but to Zachariah himself. Was this because Zachariah represented the end of one age and Elizabeth’s niece Mary the beginning of a new one? Was Gabriel’s words to Zachariah the last drops of an old wineskin?

One of, if not the, most common reaction to a human encounter with the Divine is “fear”. And over a hundred times in both the Old and New Testament the Divine response to this fear is “fear not” or “Be not afraid.”

So it is only right that the first words that Gabriel says to the old priest is, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah.” The prayer of Zechariah and Elizabeth would be answered. A son would be born to them. This son would be in the mold of the great Elijah, the one who would pave the way for God’s Messiah. Little did they know that this Messiah would be Jesus.

Zechariah did not understand how this could be possible as Elizabeth was beyond childbearing years. In answer to Zechariah’s question the angel Gabriel gave him a sign.

The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.” (vss. 19 & 20)

The sign that Gabriel gave Zechariah was one of silence. And in this world of noise, isn't that something that we seek, too?

"Be still," God said through the 46th Psalm, "Be still and know that I am God," or as another translation renders it, "Stop your fighting and be still, for I am God." (Holman Christian Standard Bible)

In the words of the Austrian Christmas carol,

“Still, still, still ...  
For all is hushed ...  
The holy star keeps vigil.”

Silence does not mean that God is not here. Not does it mean that God is absent. Silence invited us to listen more carefully to God's voice calling us to go deeper into the world around us.

For Zechariah nine months of silence was both a sign and a gift. The silence invited him to listen for God. It invited him to reflect upon God's claim upon his life. The silence gave birth to the first song of Christmas, what we call The Benedictus.

*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. <sup>69</sup> He has raised up a mighty saviour\* for us in the house of his servant 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 he 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 before him all our days. <sup>76</sup> And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, <sup>77</sup> to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. <sup>78</sup> By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon\* us, <sup>79</sup> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'*

Here's a homework assignment for you. In this season of Advent take a Zechariah moment. Set aside some time each day for a mini-silent sabbatical. Turn off your smart phone, unplug from the world around you, even for a short time, say 5 minutes. Just listen. Listen to the silence. Listen for the Presence of God. Be still. Be still for a moment.

As we celebrate this sacrament let us be still and reflect upon what God has done for us.

In the words of the Apostle Paul,

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: On the night when He was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and said, <sup>[1]</sup> “This is My body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.”

In the same way, after supper He also took the cup and said, “This cup is the new covenant established by My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.