

## The Hole Story of Advent

<sup>NRS</sup> Luk 1:5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. <sup>7</sup> But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. <sup>8</sup>

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. <sup>10</sup> Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. <sup>11</sup> Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup> You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>16</sup> He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> 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." <sup>18</sup>

Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." <sup>19</sup> The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. <sup>20</sup> But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." <sup>21</sup> Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. <sup>22</sup> When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. <sup>23</sup> When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

When I was in the Wallowas this summer I took along with me a book full of short stories all relating to travel. One story by Chris Colin completely floored me. On his way to Prague he writes: "I was peering out the grimy [train] window at the moonless German forest when I thought of [the] hole. The hole belonged to a story told by my great-grandmother, an honest woman who died recently at nearly a hundred. She'd written down much about her childhood on Western ranchland, and this particular story

had stayed with me since my own. It was not a sweet great-grandmother story but a terrifying nightmare of an account.

A hole had been discovered out there on the stark, red earth of Colorado; a crowd gathered when a local man agreed to be lowered. This was murky territory, where hopeful new towns built schools and markets, but also where Indians had slaughtered and been slaughtered. At first they lowered him slowly, I imagine, then a little faster as they realized just how deep a thing they were dealing with. Down he went. It's the darkness that I imagined as a boy, levels unknown to me but somehow known, too, deep in my heart. Further and further he went until finally there was too much quiet for anyone to feel good about. The others looked at each other and reeled him in. The man who finally surfaced was not the one who'd descended. Ghosts? Dead bodies? His own unraveling? Here the account was deliciously unsatisfying: what happened in that hole would remain a mystery because the man never spoke another word for the rest of his life. He'd lost himself." (p. 126-127 "Into the Darkness", by Chris Colin in Tales From Nowhere: Unexpected Stories From Unexpected Places)

Colin shares this haunting story because he sees it as what happens to all of us when we embark on a journey. He writes: "This is the essence of travel...it's not the change of scenery, or the new way of preparing lamb- it's you. You are lost to yourself, and you don't know who will emerge from the pit." p. 131.]

You are lost to yourself, and you don't know who will emerge from the pit. This is what today is all about- this is what Advent is all about. While the rest of the world is whipping itself into a frenzy of shopping, a panoply of parties, all of it fueled by "I Saw

Mommy Kissing Santa Clause” on the 24 hour Christmas carol station on the radio, the church actually becomes more quiet and more calm as we begin to prepare ourselves for the mystery of Christ’s birth. In Advent we embark on a journey, and there is the very real possibility that we will lose ourselves and not know exactly who will emerge in the end.

This is what happens to Zechariah, right? Poor Zechariah, this bored priest, wasn’t really looking for adventure that day, and he certainly wasn’t expecting much in the way of an amazing experience. And why should he? He’d gone in there to the temple dozens of times to offer sacrifice. Nothing had ever happened.

He’s a bit like us in that regard, isn’t he? I mean none of you would say this to my face probably, but there aren’t too many people who go to church to have a religious experience these days. There are a lot of reasons we come, but not many of you are saying to yourselves as you are getting ready in the morning, as you are reading your paper, as you are driving here: “Ok, ok, ok, I’ve got to get myself prepared for this. I’ve got to be ready. Anything could happen!” No, we’ve come to church before, we’ve been through Advent before. And lightning didn’t strike. The world didn’t end. Our little lives went on pretty much as they did before. Why would we, why would Zechariah, expect something to happen?

Of course there’s more going on with Zechariah than meets the eye. On the surface he may look like just another bored church person going through the motions- doing what he’s done a thousand times before. But Luke tells us that this isn’t the whole story with Zechariah- not by a long shot. Underneath all of the ritual, underneath all of

the empty and dead pomp and circumstance, underneath all of this, hidden away from everyone else, even from himself a little bit- underneath was an unspoken prayer.

Underneath it all, Zechariah carries deep within himself an unspoken prayer- a longing he didn't even acknowledge himself, much less anyone else. His prayer? That painful prayer- for something that comes so easily to some, unwanted even by others, and then not given at all to a few: a child. His unspoken prayer, his hope that he had never managed to extinguish was for a child, a family. But it had been so long. And he and Elizabeth were getting so old. He didn't think about it much anymore, tried not to think about it at all- but we know from the angel that even though Zechariah had buried this prayer, he hadn't buried it far enough, he couldn't bury it far enough. And there, in that unguarded moment of worship- that prayer must have somehow slipped through the defenses.

You know, I don't think there's a person who comes to this church just because you think you should or you think that God will punish you if you don't come. I don't think any of us buy that. I think we're here because we're more like Zechariah, each of us comes to this place because even though we may not always talk about it, and we may not always show it- each of us is carrying an unspoken prayer, a hidden hope, a deep desire.

When I was in the ordination process I was assigned a liaison to shepherd me through the process. He was a crusty old Texas oil man from First Pres Dallas. Of all of the folks on this is committee, I liked this guy the least. He asked a lot of questions that sounded critical to me. And his tone of voice just seemed mean. I thought I was kind of doomed with this guy. But Dick turned out to be one of the most helpful souls on that

long journey. He did ask a lot of questions- but in time I realized they weren't critical, they were helpful, they were wise. Now, before his job with me was done, and I was to pass from being an inquirer into being a candidate he looked me in the eyes one last time and he said to me, "Son, wherever you go next, I want you to remember something. Don't ever forget no matter how nice everybody'll look in the churches you'll serve, there's a broken heart in every pew." It's the best wisdom I was ever given- it didn't come from Princeton, but a Texas oil man I didn't much care for at first. Each one of, no matter what we show to everyone else, we each come here seeking something- forgiveness, healing, love, or just some peace. Each of us come here with an unspoken prayer.

Now, we don't know why Zechariah responds to Gabriel and his message the way he does- we don't know why he's a little lukewarm, why he's looking for something he can hang his hat on. Some commentators say even Zechariah had given up really believing his prayer would be heard and it was hard to from such painful disbelief to belief. Some say he was just shaking in his boots, acting out of sheer terror. Regardless, it's fair to say he drags his heels a little bit. But Gabriel is having none of it. When Zechariah asks what seems like a perfectly reasonable question: "How can I know- how can I be sure these things will come true?" Gabriel just strikes him dumb, mute, silent right there on the spot.

I've never liked this part of the story. It always seemed so petty to me. And inconsistent with the person we know God to be from the Bible. Moses argued with God.

The Psalmist not only argues with God but questions God's goodness and integrity. They aren't squashed into silence- they're actually rewarded for faithful questioning.

But as I was thinking about this this week, I realized though that I've always made an assumption with this story- I've always heard it in just one way. I've always assumed that Gabriel taking Zechariah's speech away is a kind of punishment- as if he's saying, "Because you didn't believe, you will be mute!" You know, like he's really, really angry, and like not talking for a little bit is the worst punishment imaginable.

But is it? And was this Gabriel's tone of voice? It occurred to me this week that by depriving Zechariah of speech for a brief time, maybe Gabriel wasn't cursing the priest after all. Maybe by silencing Zechariah, Gabriel was curing but *blessing* him.

Can you imagine what a relief it would be not to have to speak to everyone all the time about everything, if just for a little while? Especially for a priest- who was expected to talk all the time! Can you imagine if you weren't expected to reply to every email for a week? Can you imagine if you didn't have to pick up your phone or return calls for a month? This week Gabriel's silencing of Zechariah seemed more like a gift than anything else- giving him the room, the space he needs to prepare himself, his heart, for this unspoken prayer, buried so deeply within him, to finally rise to the surface.

Now, I know not everyone here this morning is thrilled with the way we celebrate Advent in the church. I know some of us wish we put everything in red and green as soon as Thanksgiving is done, and that we would sing Christmas carols every Sunday morning until Christmas finally arrives. Once a person came to me in Advent, very upset, honestly upset, and said, "You know, the malls all know it's Christmas. They're

all playing carols. Why doesn't the church know it?" Now you know me, I'm not a fan of tradition just for the sake of tradition. I don't like doing things I don't understand just because Presbyterians a hundred years ago did it that way. But celebrating Advent by carving out a more quiet, contemplative space and not rushing to Christmas the very minute after the Thanksgiving turkey is off the table- I think this may be one of the *best* things we do, even if we don't always like it all of the time.

Advent in Latin means coming or arriving, and in this season the church waits for the Christ child to come- we sit, we breathe, we wait. We do not rush to Rudolph- but not because we've got a beef *against* Christmas- hey, we invented it. We do this because we *love* Christmas, true Christmas. I think of these four Sundays in Advent like a refuge, a sanctuary from all the hecticness, the craziness, and all the forced cheerfulness of this season.

In Advent we receive the gift of waiting silently- we become Zechariah. And what a gift this is- because part of us knows that we will need time to get ourselves ready for the unspoken prayers nascent in our hearts, these hidden prayers that so often slip through our defenses and rise to the surface when we hear this strange, beautiful story again. That that in the fullness of time God chose not be alone, and longed for us so much so that God knelt down and took flesh, our flesh- the all powerful God becoming vulnerable, fragile, human.

Beloved, in Advent we embark on a strange journey. We travel from Tualatin to Bethlehem and back again. The church lowers us down a rope into the dark cavern of this season, and we honestly don't know how it will affect us- we really don't know

exactly who we will be when we come back out. But the good news? The good news is like Zechariah we will not be silent forever, for at the very bottom of this dark journey are not ghosts, dead bodies, or even further darkness. No, at the very bottom of Advent is light- a faint light, but a light nonetheless. A light that breaks forth like the dawn, a light to all who have walked in a land of deep darkness, the light of the Christ child, a light that brings warmth to these unspoken prayers, these deep longings in our hearts. **Amen.**