

“What (Not) to Say to an Angel Bearing Truth”
Luke 1:5-25, 57-66
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Zechariah doesn't trust the angel so the angel strikes him dumb. Shuts him up. Which is totally unfair. Zechariah's done nothing out of the ordinary for a religious leader. He's just walking through the annual liturgy doing exactly what his seminary taught him to do. Speaking the prescribed words. Doing the prescribed rituals. Offering the annual incense on the one day of the year that a priest was allowed in the sanctuary - that innermost portion of the temple. How is he supposed to know that God is going to actually show up?

God isn't supposed to actually show up in worship. Ask just about anyone who comes to church why they come here. You'll hear things like, "I come here for the community. Or I come here for the music. Or I come here for the preaching. I come here to be a better person in this mess of a time we're in at the moment and to remind others to do the same. I come here because I need hope or I like to try stuff out in a functional community, or I find it comforting in the midst of whatever I'm going through." That's what I hear people saying. Nobody says, "I'm hoping to meet God there," at least not too loudly in public. People are liable to think you are a little off your rocker. Most people don't come to church to actually meet God - including the preachers. *God is way too unpredictable* for a preacher. We have budgets to meet, and meetings to attend, and worship that's supposed to end close to an hour. *We don't have time for God to show up*, not when we're trying to complete worship.

Zechariah gets a bad rap. Zechariah's supposed to talk *about* God, not meet God here. The ritual conditions him to expect that God *doesn't* show up, not be prepared if God does. The familiarity with the position and the title and the stuff of worship has conditioned him to think that the only spiritual encounters that occur are the ones Zechariah organizes in the singing, Zechariah brings in the teaching, Zechariah brings through his efforts. The liturgy that he has written doesn't include angels showing up. I think he gets a bad rap.

And, anyway, the doubt that Zechariah expresses to Gabriel doesn't seem all that different from the doubt that Mary shares with the very same angel a bit later. Zechariah says to Gabriel: "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." Mary will say to the same angel, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" Both seem like expressions of doubt - skepticism that anyone would ask of an angel announcing unlikely possibilities. Yet Zechariah's the one who gets silenced. Clearly a lay person wrote this story!

But maybe Gabriel knows that a man like Zechariah who has reached this position of power - priest in the temple - needs to be taken down a notch to be able to prepare for what is coming. God is about to act outside the normal bounds of the liturgy. God is about to act beyond the knowledge of those who are supposed to have knowledge of God. God is about to make Zechariah parent of one of the most challenging preacher's kids who ever lived - John the Baptist. And you cannot

prepare for any of those things if your titles and your power and your rote repetitions have convinced you that your job is to manage God instead of seeking God out; that your job is to speak for God instead of listening to her; that your job is to make God present for people instead of noticing where God is showing up.

As a religious leader, I can sympathize with Zechariah. Not long after you start laboring in the temple, people start coming to you with the questions of life. Why does God act here but not there? How does it seem that God is present there but absent here? Where is God in the midst of the promises that go unfulfilled? Why did I feel God's presence then but not now? The desire to generate answers to those questions can cause you to say more than you've been authorized to say about God; to make pronouncements you haven't been authorized to make; to claim insider knowledge that you know you don't often have. *It can convince you, over time, that you don't work for God, God works for you.*

So God takes Zechariah down a notch and, with him, anyone who thinks their special knowledge of God has given them control or power over who God speaks to, or who God calls, or where God acts, or what God thinks. God takes Zechariah down a notch. Maybe that's what God does to any person or any institution that forgets who we are working for. Maybe that's what's happened to the church in North America. God calls us into community to receive holy power to act in the world, and when that call looks like it's going to cost us something, we tend to use that power to protect our own rear ends. God calls us into community to do ten times more together than we could by ourselves, and we tend to create structures and bureaucracies that suck up our energy and time and creativity while the world burns around us. We grow in finances or numbers or power but as I've heard said before growth by itself is no indication of faithfulness. Tumors grow.

Like the silencing of Zechariah, sometimes I wonder if the collapse of the church in this part of the world is part of God's judgment on us. Or at least part of the consequence of not attending to the central business of our calling: the church's disconnection from the struggles that people face in the world or our refusal to address it, our sheepishness to hold civil power accountable – the role that prophets have always played; the tendency of the church to reinforce the divisions in our culture instead of embodying God's promise to overcome them. Maybe that's why Zechariah's expression of doubt is so much more costly than Mary's. *We're the people who are supposed to expect God's life changing activity in the world.* We're supposed to notice it, announce it, give our lives to it. We're supposed to know that however bad it gets in the world, God is already active planting seeds that will grow. And maybe Zechariah's silence is proof that *there are consequences for neglecting that central mission - God isn't afraid to shut down religious systems when we don't do what God called us to do.*

But I don't think we should throw Zechariah to the woodpile just yet. Once he gets silent, he listens. Nine months of not speaking must give you a long time to listen. I did it one time for a week. Woke up in the morning in silence, ate meals in silence, walked through the woods in silence. Read in silence. Wrote in silence. Silence forces you to pay close attention to the normal stuff – your breathing, your proximity to other people and all living things. The sounds of nature whirling around us all the time yet so often ignored. Silence also makes it more difficult for

you to force things to happen. You learn to wait until things are revealed. Silence forces you to pay attention to your own life and the life of others. Silence reminds you that the world is so much bigger than only the stuff that you carry. It's the silence that the meditation group practices on Sunday morning but also the silence I witnessed yesterday from Ron Daniels, the President of Johns Hopkins University, going door-to-door in east Baltimore listening to residents tell him about their own safety and security concerns.

It was Bonhoeffer who said that when we stop listening – that the beginning of our spiritual death.

And maybe Zechariah's forced silence saved his (spiritual) life. Because as far as I can tell he took that opportunity and listened. He learned in that silence that God had big plans in store for his family; that God was active with Elizabeth, active with Mary. He learned to pay attention. We know because unlike some of his neighbors he understood that the Lord had spoken to Elizabeth his wife just as definitely as God had spoken to him. "His name is John," he wrote on the tablet but he may as well have written, "Elizabeth already told you what the Lord said." We know because of the song that he sang when his tongue was finally freed. His child would prepare the way of the Lord, would give light to those who sit in darkness; he learned that a dawn was on its way and by the mercy of God he would be a part of it. In his silence he learned that the origins of God's hope and blessings so often start so quietly, in the people and places we do not expect, that you won't notice, you cannot notice unless you are still enough to listen. Wisdom from on high is birthed from down below – the central message of Luke's Gospel.

Imagine how your life would change if you believed that truth – that wisdom from on high is so often birthed from down below. Who would you need to listen to more and who might need to be heard less in your own life? Imagine how the world would change if we believed that truth. If we believed our future was caught up less in the pronouncements of powerful people and more in what God is doing from below. Who would we need to listen to more and who might need to be reacted to less?

The Advent season is all about waiting for God's arrival. Yet God's arrival goes unperceived, undetected by most. They're not expecting the savior of the world to show up in an animal's feeding trough. They're not expecting the light to the nations to be born to an insignificant, unwed teenage mother. If you want to meet God in the world then you have to take notice. If you want to take notice you need to train yourself to listen for the signs of God's arrival.