

**“Naming God’s Story
through 150 Years of Brown Memorial”
Luke 1:57-80
Rev. Andrew Connors
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Gabriel mutes Zechariah for doubting God’s promises (Luke 1:20). And you might think that this sentence to silence is tough for a priest, what with all the jokes about how much preachers like to hear themselves speak. But lately I’ve been imagining this imposed silence as relief. Zechariah was doing his priestly thing in the days of King Herod - a leader who claimed to be a Jew while living as a wealthy tyrant in a way that would have offended most Jews - erecting a golden eagle statue in front of the temple, imposing heavy taxes on Jews and lavishing gifts on other leaders in a way to build up his own reputation with the Romans.

Which made it really hard to be a religious leader living in his shadow. It’s tough to be proud of your religious faith when there are bad actors using it to get elected, or take away other people’s rights, or tear down a society built on compassionate regard for the other. It’s tough to preach a gospel of hope when things aren’t going well for most people and the political situation shows no sign of righting itself. It’s tough to have faith, much less hold it for others when God’s way, which is supposed to be winning, seems to be losing with each new murder on Jerusalem’s streets, each new law eroding the agency of women, or people of color, or immigrants to Israelite shores. Getting silenced for 9 months surely feels like relief, even if it was intended as punishment.

I wish the text would have shared more about what Zechariah did with the gift of silent time. I imagine he spent a lot more time reading and reflecting than he normally had time to do. Returning to the stories of his faith that had shaped him, and reflecting on the stories of his life so he could better understand them. More time reflecting than acting which seems like it might have been Gabriel’s intent all along. As I’ve said in sermons before Zechariah’s words of doubt to Gabriel don’t seem all that different from Mary’s words to the same angel. Both express some version of “how can this be?” For Zechariah: “how can this be since this baby’s mom and I are so old?” (Luke 1:18) For Mary, “how can this be since I’m a virgin?” (Luke 1:34) I don’t hear either of those questions as words of doubt about God as much as they are the question of realists who understand how the world actually works. Mary gets to go on speaking. Zechariah who was living blamelessly before the law (Luke 1:6) gets silenced.

I’m not sure how to account for the difference except for the possibility that maybe God wanted Zechariah to reflect more on *what is actually happening* around him. *To notice how God is acting* when Zechariah is not. *To see more clearly the fullness of God’s activity in his life and in the world around him* at a time when God’s

activity must have seemed near absent, God's hope must have seemed more difficult to preach. And it's incredibly hard to notice God's activity when your own righteousness, your own integrity, your own work ethic degenerates into the idea that if you want more hope *you've got to work harder*, if you want more liberation *you've got to struggle more* - you've got to do more, be more, hope more, work for more. An exhausting proposition when you hit your limits and the world doesn't change. It must have been as hard for Zechariah as it is for many of us.

Brown Memorial is born at the beginning of the Christian year in the season of Advent, perhaps the hardest season for self-actuated, driven, living-according-to-the-commandments type people. If the season of Lent, with its ashes on our foreheads reminding that we are dust beckons us to contend with our mortality, Advent is the season where we are invited to sit with the reality that we are all part of stories we did not create - many of them terrible stories of tyrants willing to sacrifice children under the guise of protecting national security, or Caesars willing to sacrifice people's basic incomes under stories of "corporate downsizing"; stories of immigrants forced to flee their homes; stories of systems churning people back toward the slavery economies from which oppressed peoples are always trying to escape. Stories of neighborhoods sliced up by racist maps and mantras built on myths that are responsible for our realities more than we care to acknowledge.

We are all born into those narratives - in this scene or that one - a fact over which we have no control. And more personally, each of us is born into micro narratives - some of them terrible as well - reckoning with a father who abandoned or drank his pain away; or a mother who abused or escaped with anything and everything in between. A sibling whose illness shaped us. A family friend whose abuse nearly killed us. A parent who died too young. We all start in the middle of stories that we did not author yet which shape who we are from the beginning and for too many of us will limit who we will become. Sure, we all get some light along the way. Some of us are happy with the stories we were born into. Every story is unique. But Advent wants us to accept from the beginning that the world - left to its own devices - is marked by more darkness than light.

If that wasn't true, we'd have turned around our city by now. The people who struggled to stay here - those of us who now live here - with all the organizing, all the striving and struggling, all the elections and policy promises that claimed to be the key to building up the broken places - all the righteous people who have lived pretty closely to the commandments - loving your neighbor as yourself - we should be living in streets of gold! Advent says, shhh!!!! Get still and notice - notice from whence comes the light. Notice that it comes from more than your efforts, more than your own history, more than your own story. Notice because when you can't give any more, when you can't hope anymore, when you can't take all the darkness anymore the most important thing to learn isn't to push another mile - that's Pharaoh's message - sacrifice yourself

for the system. No, no. The most important message is to know that God is alive in the universe - love is alive in the universe. It's what or who gives life. It's what or who is weaving a different story.

John the Baptist, like each of us, is born into such a story. And if Zechariah had been able to speak along the way to John's birth, he would have shaped John's story in a particular way, which is probably why God wanted him silenced. If Zechariah had been able to speak, he would have named his baby after himself, imposing his own hopes on John instead of allowing God's life and love and hope to reveal itself. If he had been able to speak, he would have been expected to claim some greater comprehension of God's movement in his life when he actually was oblivious to the full nature of what was going on. If he had been able to speak, he would have been expected to convey understanding to a congregation precisely at the time when he didn't have understanding - the particular temptation of anyone in religious authority.

Instead, Zechariah - the priest who had been invited into the holy of holies that day - as close to God as humanly possible - is invited to observe those mysteries unfold. To watch God's peculiar way of light find its way in the darkness. What he sees is unlike any story he would have authored. His own child called to announce the coming liberator of his people. God coming near to us in the flesh in the form of a baby born to no one royal or rich - but to a common human being. The normal channels of power disrupted and reversed. From a king to a child. From the patriarchy to women unassisted by their male protectors, so-called. From the glistening city of Jerusalem to the underdog town of Bethlehem, the house of bread. Zechariah is silenced so that he can observe - and observing come to understand in his heart, his soul - that God is active beyond his own understanding, beyond our religiously validated ways, beyond our arrangements, beyond himself.

Most of us skip over that part because we're not able or willing to listen or observe. And when we're not able to do that, at some point along our journey, all we see is the story of tyrants, of the world going to hell, of people mistreating each other, of dreams dashed, plans destroyed, of way too much death and dying. When that's all we see we lose hope that any of this stuff called faith is worth anything, not realizing that all along what we've been calling faith is faith in ourselves. Our own activities, our own organizing, our own efforts. And there's a time for that - 11 months out of the year - roughly 92% of the time - faith without works is dead. But not this month, not our birth month. This is the time to remember and to see that the reason we come here is to know, to see, to observe that *God is real - God is here, God is active* - has been all along.

Naming where and how God has been active is one of the hardest things we are called to do. In part, because, our understanding of God's activity changes over time. Isabella Brown's extraordinary gift of \$150,000 to build Brown Memorial in 1869 can't be understood in the same purely generous way as it was in 1869 now that we know that

some of that wealth was generated from the slave trade - the buying and selling of human beings. The Trustees' decision in the early 20th century to refuse to put language in the church deed stating that it would never sell to African-Americans can't be understood as heroic when those same Trustees justified their opposition to the segregationists by saying it isn't necessary to do that here - a decision to sell to anyone would revert the property back to the Brown family. The decision to build a second location in the county in the 1950s can't be understood only as a clever way to keep this Park Avenue open when there is little record of any substantive conversation about the racism that was driving white and middle class people to the suburbs in the first place.¹

Naming where and how God has been active is one of the hardest things we are called to do because we often get it wrong or incomplete, but it's not impossible and we shouldn't stop trying. It is possible to see that in a nation whose wealth is built on so much human racism and misery, that same wealth can be used to reverse ancient wrongs, to heal long-festered wounds, to repair what has been hurt. It is possible to learn from our Trustees' incomplete stand against segregationist policies so that we match their refusal to join a racist surge with words to name what is right and just. It is possible to reverse the plights of our city without displacing Black and working class people as we've done and continue to do in harbor-based developments that do not include affordable housing, or in Black neighborhoods divided by highways where we still have the power to bring investment and healing. We can see God at work in all of these places and in us, too, bringing light into the places where it is absent, bringing grace where we have experienced mostly sin - if we are willing and able to tell the truth about what's happened to us as a people, as a city, as human beings. That truth is rarely the story of light working through pure people completely differentiated from our sin. It is more often the story of light breaking through our brokenness, around it, underneath it.

Maybe that's why naming God is so difficult for liberal people to do in 2021. We seem to have inherited some dualistic idea that God's activity is always attached to the purest of human action. So we've learned to tell whitewashed, heroic stories about ourselves on the one hand, or tear down any less than perfect action that has been taken on the other, instead of recognizing that God is involved in working light through our messes, our own mixed motives, working good out of what is incomplete in us.

I believe God was present in Maltie Babcock's life - the most beloved pastor of Brown Memorial's history - God was active in his life including in his struggle with depression, even when the Church, reeling from his death by suicide, was too ashamed to talk about his illness. God was present in unveiling the classism of our church even

¹ For these and other insights, I am referring to the unpublished document entitled "Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church: History and Race" produced by Brown Memorial member and journalist Tom Waldron in December of 2020, as well as my own reading of our archives on "Archive Dives" sponsored by the church leadership as part of the church's intentional efforts to better understand our own history.

when we pretended it wasn't there. God has been active in our own struggles around where we send our children to school, or where we choose to live even when we pretend those choices aren't drenched in the racist history and structures of our time.

God has been active in the mess of our lives and the mess of our congregation which is critical to see if we have any hope of another 150 years. Because Zechariah's story is proof that even the most righteous of people, blameless under the commandments - they have problems. We have problems. We need light. We need hope. We need faith. And we're not going to change the world, much less the city, much less our own lives, by pretending it isn't so. Hypocrisy is a serious problem in the church, but underneath this problem of not walking the talk, lies an inability to tell the truth about ourselves. And underneath that problem is the refusal of a community to hold the space to face truths with as much compassion and love as God meets us; to hold it, not with shame - but with the conviction that God is capable of bringing light into our darkness, trusting God's grace and mercy with our whole lives and building a community together that trusts this is so. This is the foundation from which all justice flows.

Zechariah's story ends in praise and prophecy - real faith seems to flower there. "By the tender mercy of our God," he says, "the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." God's deep story of liberation envelops his own which for Zechariah seems to change everything. But we shouldn't overlook how much it changes things for John. John is freed from his father's legacy and limitations. Free to fulfill his own unique calling. The one who is born to pave the way for light is free to become the fullness of himself. There is no better gift that can be given to a child or to a community like us.

At a time when there are bad actors using our faith to get elected, or take away other people's rights, or tear down a society built on compassionate regard for the other. At a time when things aren't going well for most people and the political situation shows no sign of righting itself. At a time when God's way, which is supposed to be winning, seems to be losing with each new murder on our streets, each new law eroding the agency of women, or people of color, or immigrants to our shores, this news feels like relief. Who God has created you to become, created me to become, created us to become together - it's enough. God's story flowing through our lives and others is enough. Enough to free you and me, enough to free our city, enough to free our world from those terrible narratives that seem to be our destiny so that God's story can have its way and guide us into the way of peace.