

Welcome, Child

Luke 1:67-79, Malachi 3:1-4

Mark Schloneger

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See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

(Malachi 3:1-4, NRSV)

When a baby is born to Muslim parents,
 everyone in the birth chamber is asked to be silent.
The doctor, the nurses, the aids.
Silence.
Before any other words are said,
 the father will take the baby in his arms,
 and whisper in his right ear the Muslim call to prayer.
This is so the very first words the child hears
 are ones that name the one and only God
 and that call him or her to serve God alone.
The child enters the world in silence,
 or at least silence from everyone else,
 until he or she hears the call to serve the one and only God.
This call to prayer is called the Adhan,
 and the Arabic root of this word means "to listen, to hear, to be informed".

Welcome, child.

The book of Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament.
Malachi speaks the words of an angry God
 to an unfaithful people.
They have returned from exile in Babylon,
 they worship in a rebuilt temple,
 but they are skimping on their end of the covenant.
Malachi says that they are offering their leftovers to God, their table scraps,
 and they have the gall to call this their "sacrifice."
Whether it is food, time, money, or energy,
 it is not a "sacrifice" if it's merely what's left over

after you have binged on other things.
God is not honored by that.

The priests are supposed to be God's messengers,
yet they cause the people to stumble.

Even their worship has nothing to do with honoring God.
"What's in it for us?" they ask about their service to God.

In just a few verses after the ones that I just read,
the priests are quoted as saying,

"What did we gain by carrying out God's requirements
and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?" (Malachi 3:14)

Malachi says that it would be better for someone to shut those temple doors
than for them to continue to profane God's name by going through the motions.
(1:10)

In the last verses of Malachi the book, in the last prophecy of Malachi the prophet,
God promises to send another prophet, Elijah,
to turn the hearts of parents toward their children,
and the hearts of children toward their parents.

After these words, silence.

You turn the page on Malachi, you get a blank page.

You get silence.

God's silence.

Before we read the scripture before us from Luke's gospel,
we have to account for the silence.

The four hundred years of silent nights.

(silence)

Zechariah was a priest in the order of Abijah.

He and his wife, Elizabeth were righteous before God,
living blamelessly before the Lord, Luke says.

But their life wasn't entirely happy.

They did not have children.

At that time, this was considered a disgrace, a tragedy,
a sign of God's punishment.

Those of you who have experienced infertility know this struggle better than I do.

You know what it can do to you,

how it can affect your relationship with your spouse, with others, with God.

Even today, I know that infertility can be hard to talk about.

It is a struggle that is too often suffered . . . in silence.

Elizabeth was barren, Luke says, in words we would never use today.

After Malachi, the prophets were barren, silent for four hundred years.

No promises, no prophecies, no prophets.

No child for Elizabeth to carry in her womb,
no words to shape Israel's future.

How can you imagine a tomorrow that is different from today,
when there is nothing new, nothing to carry, nothing to nurture and grow?

How have you experienced this silence?
God's silence?

As a priest, Zechariah was expected to serve
as a mediator between God and the people.

His was a life that was to be set apart, exemplary, and full.

But I wonder how this experience of infertility, of barrenness, of silence,
affected his ability to trust, to hope, to wait on the Lord,
to speak for the Lord.

Maybe he had become comfortable speaking to God for the people
and about God to the people
but he had given up listening for and expecting anything other than silence.

There's a difference, you know.

Speaking to God and about God don't necessarily require God.

I wonder about this, because,
during his service at the temple,
Zechariah was chosen by lot to offer incense
in the sanctuary of the Lord, the most Holy Place.

A priest could only perform this role once during his lifetime.

And when Zechariah went in to perform this once-in-a-lifetime duty
and when he was greeted by an angel
who said that Elizabeth would bear a son,
and that this son, to be named John, would prepare the people for the Lord,
his response was, basically, "Oh yeah? Prove it."

Zechariah was terrified, to be sure, but he had reasonable doubts.

The years and years of God's silence to his prayers, to Elizabeth's prayers,
restrained his capacity to imagine anything different.

"How can I be sure of this?" he told the angel.

"I am an old man, and my wife? She's no spring chicken."

(To use the King James version.)

The angel, Gabriel, basically said, "You want a sign? I'll give you a sign."

"Because you didn't believe my words,
you will be silent, until the days these things occur."

And, just like that, Zechariah is the one who is silenced
while a new prophet with new words grows inside Elizabeth's womb.

You know, I used to think that what happened to Zechariah
was a sort of punishment for having the gall to question God.

But I no longer think of it like that.

The Bible is full of people who question God.
God is big enough for our questions.

No, I don't think of Zechariah's lost capacity to speak as a punishment.
It was an extension of God's mercy,
 a way for Zechariah to listen to what God had said,
 to observe the new thing that God was doing,
 and to embrace a future, God's future, that was different than the present.

Silence does not mean absence.
Silence does not mean indifference.
Silence is not barren.

During the nine months that life was silently taking root and growing in Elizabeth's womb,
 the words that we are about to hear were silently taking root and growing in Zechariah.

Then, when Zechariah's participated in God's future
 by confirming that his newborn son would be named John,
 his mouth was opened and his tongue was freed
 to utter the words that he had carefully nourished in silence.

These words burst forth with a cry of life,
 an announcement that something new had arrived

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah praised God
 and spoke this prophecy,
 reading from Luke 1:68-79 (NRSV)

*"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
 for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
 for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
 and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
 to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
 before him all our days.*

*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
 for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
 by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
 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."* (Luke 1:68-79)

Welcome, child.
 welcome into God's embrace.

Welcome, child,
welcome others into God's embrace
by preparing the people for the way of the Lord.

I think nine months in silence
prepared Zechariah to recognize and receive God's mercy.

In silence, you give up your right to be heard.

In silence, you leave room for others to speak.

In silence, you pay less attention to your next words
and more attention to listening to another's next words.

In silence, you make more room for the other to be with you.

That, I think, could be a definition of mercy:

to make room for another to be with you -- fully, as they are.

But it's hard to lay claim to mercy when are encouraged to do just the opposite.

We are told to assert our rights and then to cry out or take revenge
when those rights aren't respected.

It is only smart, we're told, to think the worst of others and to act accordingly.

Mercy, though, makes room for the other.

Mercy is a willing release of our rights for the sake of another.

When we extend mercy, we look like God, because mercy comes from God.

Out of the silence, mercy.

Whatever we think we're doing, we are not communicating the gospel
until we have learned enough about another person
to say it in such a way that it can be received as good news.

What would happen if we would begin to identify ourselves
not as a congregation with the right positions for the right issues
on the right side of history,
but as a congregation of mercy?

How can we make clear to everyone, without words, that,
before we will even attempt to speak into your life,
there is space for you to be here with us?

What would happen if everyone heard this welcome?

We extend a special welcome if you are single, married, divorced, gay,
transgender, filthy rich, dirt poor, y no habla ingles, or you don't speak Spanish.

We extend a special welcome to seniors who find it hard to walk
and babies and toddlers who find it hard to keep still.

We extend a special welcome to those struggling with their mental and emotional health
and those who don't know it. Yet.

We extend a special welcome to those with physical limitations
and those with physical obsessions.

We extend a special welcome to those chasing achievements

and those running from failure.

We extend a special welcome to addicts, atheists, agnostics, asthmatics, and psychosomatics.

We extend a special welcome to the judgmental, parental, temperamental,
transcendental, sentimental, and independent(-al).

We extend a special welcome to you, because, in Christ, God has mercifully welcomed us.

Well, maybe we would teach others to sing the song that Zechariah sang:

*By the tender mercy of our God,
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.*

Look closely. Listen carefully.

In the darkness, in the silence, something new is growing.

After nine months of silence, Zechariah sang of God's welcome
to his people and to his child.

After four hundred years of silent nights,

Elizabeth and Zechariah's child would bring a new word to God's people,
prophesying of the Messiah and making straight the way to Jesus.

And, in Jesus, God embraces us and whispers in our ears:

Welcome, child.

In the beginning the earth was a formless void, dark, silent,
until I spoke all of creation into existence.

Welcome, child, I have put my word in you
and this word, my word, gives you hope and a future.

Welcome, child, in the darkness, my light has dawned,
in the silence, my word becomes life,
in your despair, I embrace you.

Now that you have been welcomed, go and welcome others.

Welcome, child.