

Luke 1: 5-13, 18-20 "Angels and Birth-Giving Silence" 12/2/18

It seems that 7 year old Betsy had wanted to be a vampire for Halloween but her mom had spent several weeks sewing her a ladybug costume. The parents had gotten her to finally agree to be a ladybug this year and next year she could be a vampire. A few weeks after Halloween, the Sunday School class began to prepare for the annual Christmas pageant. Betsy's teacher told them that they could choose to be either a shepherd or an angel. The teacher was perplexed when Betsy ran out of the class in tears searching for her father. When she found him, she sniffled through her tears. "My teacher says I can only be a Christmas angel or a Christmas shepherd for the pageant." Her dad asked, "Well what was wrong with that, it is always the older kids who do Mary or Joseph?" Betsy reminded him, "But Daddy I don't want to be a Christmas angel or shepherd, I want to be a Christmas vampire!"

For whatever reason, very few of us long to be angels – these beings seem out of our reach, other-worldly, and often more scary than vampires. In Jesus' birth narratives, angels come across, for the most part, pretty frightening. We know this because they are constantly having to tell us human characters, "Do not be afraid." In our story today, Zechariah is the first of the victims to be scared half out of his wits by an angel. Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth were the parents of the one who would announce the Messiah soon to be born – we know him as John the Baptist. But they started out as a barren old couple, and in their time, all the blame fell on Elizabeth for not producing a child. Zechariah could have divorced her for it but he didn't. Both of them were righteous, faithful people and Zechariah was even a priest which meant he served for a week in the temple in Jerusalem on a periodic basis a far distance away from where they lived. When that time came, Elizabeth didn't beg him not to go, she didn't hang onto him. She understood his job required him to go away, it was just something one did,

like working for the Forest Service – when needed, you head off for Lee Vining or Paradise to serve on behalf of the people. Whether or not Elizabeth went with Zechariah in body, she went with him in spirit, and what he did there, he did for her as well.

Our story turns out to be the most important day in this couple's life. Zechariah is to enter the sanctuary alone, a sobering task because it was believed therein was the most Holy of Holies and you took your life in your own hands by entering into that part of the Temple. This tradition of reverence and gut-wrenching awe was even more severe in Solomon's day where the high priest was sent into the temple, into the presence of the Lord, with a rope tied around his leg, so that if he was struck dead inside, the people could haul him out with risking destruction themselves. Is it any wonder that the rest of the people remain safely outside praying while Zechariah goes in? Zechariah would light a fire to burn incense whose smoke would carry the prayers to God, perfuming them as they arose. No priest ever did it twice in his lifetime and some never got to do it all – it was that serious and important.

Concentrating so hard on what he was doing, Zechariah didn't immediately recognize the angel but when he did, he nearly jumped out of his skin. As I am sure firefighters will tell you, it is one thing to control a fire you have lit, it is another thing entirely for that fire to take on a life of its own. The angel appears in firey light on the right side of the altar and is unlike anything Zechariah has seen before. As if to make sure we get it, Luke writes, "Zechariah was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel says what? "Do not be afraid, for your prayer has been heard." Which prayer was that? Not a prayer for the people, on that day of all days, but a prayer for a child of his own. It was going to happen, the angel told him. It was such a sure thing that the miracle already had a name: John. Then the angel goes into glorious

detail about all the child will be and do. “Joy and gladness,” the angel said, “spirit and power,” but Zechariah is skeptical. “How can I know this is so,” he asked the scary angel, “For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years?” It was a mistake, one of those thudding faux-pas that makes you wish you could start over again, like when your loved one gives you the very present you ask for and the first thing out of your mouth is, “How much did it cost?” Take it from me, not the appropriate response and something I’ve done more times than I can count. “How can this be so?” Scholars call it the sin of disbelief but Barbara Brown Taylor questions this. Maybe it is more like the failure of imagination, a fear of disappointment, a habit of hopelessness. After all, you have waited a long time for something that hasn’t happened yet, you’ve gotten used to not being heard, how are you supposed to know this time will be different?

“I am Gabriel,” the angel answers. “I stand in the presence of God and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news, but since you didn’t believe my words, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” The angel silenced him so that as he left the temple, he couldn’t even finish doing his job and speaking the blessing to the people who waited. When he returned home, he might not have been able to speak but he was able to do something else essential to the plan, and it wasn’t long before Elizabeth conceived. Some see Zechariah’s condition as punishment for doubt but what if the silence was more a gift instead? It seems more in God’s way of doing things to include rather than exclude so could it be that God has included Zechariah in this sacred birth process? I like the idea that the silence was a sabbatical of sorts, a gestation period of his own during which Zechariah’s seeds of hope were sown again within that quieted soul. Zechariah couldn’t learn anything

while his mouth was constantly running, so maybe the silence provided the benefit of needed growth. Nothing Zechariah could say held a candle to what was happening right in front of him, and his muteness turned out to be that wilderness in which his dream would be born.

Taylor remarks that Zechariah could be considered the patron saint of the 21st century church. Like him, we have been waiting a long time for Christ to come again, but where is the Messiah? How much longer must we wait? What do you say when people ask where this God is that we speak of? Our words can feel as old and tired as we are, and in many cases, people have stopped believing us. They ask us, “How can we know this is so?” So maybe it is time for us to claim the angel’s gift of silence again – to stop talking so much, to stop trying to explain, to shut our mouths before the frightening and awe-inspiring mystery of God, and see what the quiet has to teach us. Maybe we don’t have to go completely mute, but is it time for us to explore the idea that less is more? Our age of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram brings us face-to-face with a constant bombardment of words and images – it is always the rush hour on the information highway. Each day feeds our addiction to data, analysis, and that tantalizing illusion that someone can tell us what is really going on behind the scenes. But the truth is that very few words come to us without some hidden purpose. Words are used to win our votes, to change our minds and to empty our wallets. Words promise us things they can’t deliver and pretty to know things no can know. There is no longer a correlation between word and truth. Each of us reserves the right to wait and see for ourselves. “How will I know this is so?”

What would happen, I wonder, in a world like this if Christians were to become very still and quiet, creating spaces of silence for people whose ears ache and whose heads hurt from all the noise? What would happen if we stopped pretending we could read God’s mind and just

sat down somewhere to nothing together, watching out for whatever new thing God is doing next? What if, when we did speak, we committed ourselves to telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, including all the things that we do not and can never know about God? What if we believed that silence is a virtue, pleasing to God? Zechariah learned the hard way – he couldn't speak until all the angel promised him came true. Our silence is voluntary, such as it is. But I invite you to let it become a quieting of the soul, a watching and a waiting for the Messiah, that will settle for nothing less than the truth. Then and only then, we might just discover the dream will be born.