

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



Advent is a rather chaotic time of year. “You snooze, you lose,” that’s the mantra of the season with limited-time sales trying to collect our money. The laundry list of “things to get done” before Christmas seems never-ending, and so I’m sure we all have lots on our minds these days.

There is nothing really wrong with that in and of itself. Busy-ness helps to keep us out of trouble and makes the days go faster—“Idle hands are the Devil’s tools” and all that. The problem is when we lack balance. In this case, the problem is when we don’t balance the busy time with necessary quiet time—the human body and the human soul really require both.

And so for our Midweek Advent services this year, we will be making time for a little bit of quietness. I would encourage you to use these evenings to silence your minds and to focus instead on the busy-ness that God set about in order to send your Savior at the proper time.

The first of our three meditations on silence centers around the account of a man who was actually *forced* by an angel to close his mouth and to open his ears and his heart to the Word and promise of God. We read about him already, his name is Zechariah. For our sermon, we will be considering the entire account which we’ve already read, but we’ll mostly be focusing in on the following verses, which I will read again:

Luke 1:18-20 *And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."*

So we have Zechariah, probably would be considered “great guy” in the eyes of the world, but even better than that the Bible tells us that he was **“righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.”** (Luke 1:6) Now when the Bible says he was **“righteous before God”** that in no way means that Zechariah was without sin. It also does not mean that he earned his way into God’s good graces by living a good life. When the Bible speaks of “Righteousness before God” we rightly understand this as a judicial term. So, in a court of law, a defendant is only innocent if declared to be so by the Judge. Well God is the almighty judge who declares people to be righteous, innocent of all charges. And so just as He does for you and me, God declared Zechariah to be “not guilty” because of his faith in the promised Savior.

But didn’t that passage also say that he walked **“blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord”**? In man’s eyes, he certainly appeared to blameless in pretty much every way imaginable. There might be those fellow Christians in your life that you just can’t imagine struggling with sin, they just appear to be blameless. That’s what Zechariah was like. God, however, saw the man’s heart. There He found plenty of sin also in Zechariah, but nonetheless regarded him as righteous because He trusted in the Savior for forgiveness. This evening’s text bears all this out, for a sinless man does not doubt the word of an angel of God. Nor does a perfect, sinless man tremble with fear in the presence of holiness. But we’ll see that Zechariah does both.

So we find this man, Zechariah, faithfully serving in the temple where he is visited by God’s holy messenger. Some important ideas to note there. That visit to Zechariah was the first public announcement from God that the time of fulfillment was finally at hand. That moment, which had been eagerly anticipated since the Fall in the Garden of Eden, 4,000 years of human history, and now the time arrived. Imagine you’re in Zechariah’s

shoes, and this moment for which Adam and Eve and Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Kings David and Solomon and the Prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah—for which they'd all been waiting—it's announced specifically to you first. This is a history-altering announcement and a privilege for Zechariah.

But there's a healthy amount of irony in this moment as well. The irony is that this promise of the long-awaited Messiah who will be ushering in the New Covenant from God, it was given there among the symbols of the Old Covenant. An Old Testament priest with his law-mandated priestly garb with his incense burner working in the place where sacrifices for sin were made daily—there he was told that the time of the Great Sacrifice and of the New Covenant had finally arrived. All of this ceremony, all of this sacrifice, all of these symbols, were finally about to meet their end in the Messiah.

This was incredible news, so what exactly was the reaction of this righteous, God-fearing, promise-believing priest when he received the news that would forever alter the course of world events and usher in a new relationship between God and mankind? Skepticism and doubt. Why? Why wouldn't a man who was described as ***"righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord,"*** why wouldn't that guy jump in jubilation at this news?

Maybe because it is relatively easy for us to believe in promises when they are abstract and impersonal, but it becomes much more difficult to believe when they are concrete and individual.

Try that on for size in your own personal life and see how it fits. Don't you find it easy to agree that ***"God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not charging their sins to them."*** (2 Corinthians 5:19) It's easy to agree with that statement when you think in terms of "the world," but then find it much more difficult to say, "God was in Christ, reconciling me to Himself, not charging my sins to my own spiritual account"? How much easier to say "God forgives sins for Jesus' sake" than to say "God has forgiven my sin of _____ (fill in the blank—theft, adultery, lust, bad language, hatred, coveting) for Jesus' sake." Easier to believe that "God loves sinners" than to imagine that "God also could love me." Yet for the first to be true, the second must also be true. God loves sinners, you are a sinner, therefore, God loves you.

Zechariah believed that God would send a Savior, but that confidence just seemed to fall apart when he became involved. His confidence was shaken when he ran head-first into the wall of his own reason. The "reason problem" was that he and his wife were too old to have a child. Sounds kind of silly to us in the context of Scripture doesn't it? Zechariah undoubtedly knew the story of his ancestors Abraham and Sarah, who were also given a son in their old age. Doubting the word of an angel is silly enough in itself, how much more so to doubt when it had happened before and given the fact that he was talking to an angel, delivering the promise of a miracle from God. To put it another way, Zechariah believed that the promise would one day be fulfilled, he believed that he was talking to an angel, he believed that a similar old-age birth had once taken place, but nonetheless he doubted the angel's message when his own frailties entered the picture.

I like the angel's response. ***"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."*** "Who do you think you're talking to!?" Have you ever been scolded like that? Not what you want to hear from your parents, because it means you messed up. Well, that's essentially what Gabriel says to Zechariah here. "Who do you think you are talking to!?" Not because he was Gabriel, but because he was a messenger of Almighty God. Zechariah was hearing the Word of the Lord, and was treating it like it was just an empty promise from some normal person. He'd forgotten that this is God speaking, and when God speaks, it is as good as already done.

The result was that the mighty Gabriel gave Zechariah something of a "time out." Because of his words of doubt, he was not allowed to utter another word (doubting or otherwise) until the day that God's holy

promise was fulfilled. Preparation for the birth of a child is another one of those busy times of life, but this forced silence served to remove Zechariah from the hustle and bustle of the next 40 weeks and afforded him the time to contemplate the angel's message and his initial reaction.

In Zechariah's case, the angel-imposed silence was exactly what he needed. You will no doubt recall how this story eventually ended:

"Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." ⁶¹ And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." ⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God." (Luke 1:57-64).

Note that Zechariah did not say, "His name shall be John" as though he was the one making decision. He said simply, "His name is John," acknowledging what the angel had spoken to him and that God Himself had already decided what the boy's name would be.

Clearly, Zechariah learned his lesson. That silence had done him good. It is God who determines what will be and what will not be. Although we often fog up the picture with doubt and skepticism, our failures don't alter God's promises. God had predetermined the role Zechariah's son would play just as he had also determined the boy's name. Perhaps it took some quiet time for Zechariah to be reminded that with God all things are possible. A little bit of silence went a long way for Zechariah.

Let's also take some quiet time this Advent season. Let's stop talking and stop rushing around long enough to listen—to listen to those blessed promises of God and to apply them to ourselves and to our own eternal futures. Listen to the promises of the angels and see the baby in the manger, and think about these things in concrete ways. That is to say, not only did Jesus come into the world to save the world, He came here to save you. The angels heralding the birth of the Savior, they were announcing to *you* that *your* Savior had come. Jesus did not just leave the perfection of Heaven to save others, He left Heaven and was made man to save me.

Sometimes life just gets too loud to hear such things. Sometimes life gets too busy that it feels like all these messages are for someone else, and I just happen to be here as well. But no, these blessed, comforting, revitalizing truths they're yours too. May the Lord help us to silently ponder these things, and rejoice that they are our very own. Amen.