

When the Silence Breaks

Luke 1:57-79

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Kathleen Norris tells this story:

“Over the years when I worked as an artist in elementary schools I devised an exercise for the children regarding noise and silence. I’ll make a deal with you, I said – first you get to make noise, and then you’ll make silence.

The rules for noise were simple: when I raise my hand... you make all the noise you can while sitting at your desk – using your mouth, hands, and feet. The kids’ eyes would grow wide – and the teacher’s as well – so I’d add, the important thing is that when I lower my hand, you have to stop.

I found that we’d usually have to make two or three attempts to attain an acceptable din – shouting, pounding, stomping. The wonder is, we never got caught. Maybe because the roar lasted for just a few seconds and school principals assumed that they’d imagined the whole thing.

The rules for silence were equally simple. I learned to say, ‘do not hold your breath and make funny faces,’ as this seemed to be how third graders imagined silence. Just breathe normally but quietly: the only hard thing is to sit so still that you make no noise at all.

We always had to try this more than once. A pencil would roll down someone’s desk, or someone would shift in a seat. But in every case but one, over many years, I found that children were able to become so still that silence became a presence in the room.

Some kids loved it. I believe it was a revelation to them – and certainly to their teachers – that they could be so quiet. ‘Let’s do it again,’ they’d say.

Others weren’t so sure. ‘It’s scary,’ one fifth grader complained.

‘Why?’ I asked. And I believe I got to the heart of it when he replied, ‘It’s like we’re waiting for something – it’s scary!’” (*Amazing Grace*, 16-17).

While impossible to nail down the exact dates, most scholars hold that there was about a four hundred year period between what we think of as the end of the Old Testament and the start of the New Testament. Do you know what we Christians have traditionally called that intertestamental period?

(Pause and wait for answer...)

I’m giving you a clue right now...

(Another long pause, look at watch, stay quiet, look at watch again.)

We have called it *the long silence*.

Why “the long silence?” Because in the scheme of the Biblical canon, four hundred years is a long time to wait for a word from God.

For four hundred years, the people of Israel waited for God to make good on all those promises:

- Promises of *material blessing* — wealth and land and health and peace
- Promises of *numerous descendants* — “more numerous than the stars in the sky...” (Gen. 22:17).
- Promises of a *king on the throne* from the line of David — “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse...” (Is. 11:1).
- Promises of *deliverance* from the brutal empires of the world — “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...” (Is. 9:2).

But, century after century after century after century, none of them were answered. Empires came and empires went — each one occupying *their* land and demanding *their* wealth. A foreign king had come to sit on *their* throne. *Their* holy city was under the heel of foreign powers and invaded by foreign gods. They walked in darkness, but they saw no great light.

For four hundred long years, the people of Israel had waited for God’s voice, but heard only silence.

The *long* silence.

What was it Kathleen Norris’ fifth grader said about silence?

“It’s like we’re *waiting* for something. And it’s *scary*.”

The old priest, Zechariah, knew what it was like to wait on God.

He and his wife, Elizabeth, had been unable to have children. And, in that day and time, the blame was always laid at the foot of the woman, and so Elizabeth was labeled as barren — which is a painful word to have laid at your feet.

Barren is a word we use to describe a desert. *Barren* implies an uninhabitable ecosystem, a place where life struggles to survive. When you have *barren* laid at your feet, the womb, the very thing that is supposed to be the very cradle of life becomes, instead, a tomb, a place of death and grief.

Do you know what that does to a person? The disgrace it brings? The feelings of inadequacy? The stigma?

And what made it particularly painful was that both Zechariah and Elizabeth had been faithful to God. They'd been *more* than faithful. *They* were from the priestly lines of Abijah and Aaron. *They* lived blamelessly according to all of the commandments. *They* were righteous before God (Lk. 1:6). *They* did everything right, but still *they* had no child, no heir.

And so, *they* would be the end of their line.

In case you missed it, this is where we might be tempted to ask, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Well, by the time we get to their story, they are both old. "Advanced in years" is how the Bible likes to say it. Too old now to have kids, they'd long given up praying those prayers. Those dreams had been put on a shelf long ago, and had since collected dust.

But the thing is, when it comes to God, silence does not mean absence.

The day came when Zechariah was chosen by lot to attend to the Lord in the sanctuary of the temple. And while he did, a messenger from God named Gabriel appeared to him and told him that those dusty, old prayers that they'd left on that shelf were going to be answered. They were to have a son. They were to name him John. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit and the power of the great prophet, Elijah. He would prepare the way of the Lord.

Can you imagine old Zechariah in that moment? Perplexed not just by the announcement, but by the simple biology of it.

"How will I know this? I'm not sure you've noticed, but I am advanced in years. And despite what she tells everyone, my wife is not still 39 years old."

Any of us who would consider ourselves "advanced in years" can probably understand Zechariah's question, but Gabriel interpreted it as doubt, and for his unbelief he is struck dumb... mute... speechless — at least until the angel's words would be fulfilled.

Isn't it interesting that *the long silence* between the Old and New Testaments comes to its close by God striking someone silent?

In a way, I can't help but think of Zechariah as a metaphor for all the people of Israel. All these centuries they've endured the long silence, and here at the close of that silence, God strikes Zechariah, the priest — the one who stands between the people and God — mute.

And while the people of Israel had to endure a long silence, I suspect we have the opposite problem. When was the last time you experienced silence? Not even a long silence, just a short one?

I almost never do.

I wake up to my alarm at 5:00 AM most every morning. I put on my workout clothes and go down to my basement to hit the treadmill, where I immediately turn on a TV and watch a show while I jog. After my workout, I turn on my little bluetooth speaker and play a podcast or a book while I get ready for the day. On the way to work, I turn on the radio and listen to the morning news. I often play music in my office while I answer emails. I usually listen to a book while I'm driving to make visits or run errands or get to meetings. On the way home, I turn on the radio again and catch up on the day's news. While Christen and I make dinner, I say, "Hey Siri, play the Beatles," and we listen to music while we cook. After dinner, we go downstairs and watch TV until it's time for bed. And I usually fall asleep with my phone in my hand and a movie playing.

Does that sound familiar to your day at all?

When I met with the Executive Council for my annual review, one of them asked me if I was doing anything that was intended to help me rest and recover, but that wasn't actually working.

I thought for about two seconds. And I said, "I watch TV at night. I'm so tired when I get home that I turn on the TV and try to find something brainless to watch. But I don't think it's helping me. It might be helping me cope, helping me numb myself for a couple of hours — but it's not helping me rest, not helping me recover."

It was a lightbulb moment for me.

The Israelites had to endure the long silence. *I just avoid it — because it's scary.*

What might God say to me if I entertained silence in my life? What unresolved grief might come to the surface? What insecurity might be revealed? What needed change might disclose itself to me if I was willing to sit with myself in silence for a little bit and not just drown it out with noise?

Maybe you can relate. We avoid silence, because silence means we have to be alone with our own thoughts — and that can be scary.

But if we can't be alone with ourselves, what good are we really for others?

Ellen F. Davis has said, "Silence is the friend who challenges us to be healed when we wish simply to be soothed" (*Getting Involved with God*, 127).

What might happen in us if we could sit in the silence? If we could let it challenge us to be healed and not just soothed? How different might advent be for us, if we weren't so scared of the silence that comes with the waiting?

On the day that John was born, all of the neighbors and relatives gathered together and rejoiced with Zechariah and Elizabeth. But when it came time to name the child, they could not understand why Elizabeth insisted on naming the boy John. It wasn't a family name. Didn't they want to name him after his dad or grand dad?

The all turned to Zechariah. He pulled out a tablet and penned on it these words: "His name is John" – because Zechariah understood that God had named him John before he was ever even conceived. And like a Christmas miracle, his tongue was uncaged and before he knew it, he'd broken out into song:

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up for us a mighty savior
in the house of the servant David...
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors" (Luke 1:68-69, 72).

And then Zechariah looked down at the baby boy in his arms and he said:

"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways" (Luke 1:76).

The song he sings is thought to be an ancient hymn of the early church. It's often referred to as the *Benedictus* – which is Latin for the very first word of the hymn: blessed.

And notice who Zechariah is blessing. He's blessing the Lord God of Israel – the very one who struck him mute. And his blessing is the last word we ever hear from Zechariah. His last word is a *benedictus* – a benediction. His last word is a blessing.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells this story:

"My father died after a small seizure caused by his advanced brain cancer knocked him for a loop two weeks before Christmas. After the seizure was over and the ambulance had taken him to the hospital, my mother and I followed in my car. Soon his small cubicle in the emergency room was full of my sisters, their sons, and our husbands, all crowded on a white bench set against the wall.

The doctors and nurses checked my father's pupils, took his blood, rolled him over so they could replace his bathrobe with a hospital gown. They were in no hurry... Clearly, this was no emergency. These professionals had seen lots of old men die and this one was no different. Watching them do their work, the rest of us gradually realized that my father was dying too."

She says the family did the things family's do in such situations. They milled about, went and got coffee from the vending machine, occasionally one or two whispered something to their dad and kissed him on the forehead.

But then, she says, “I noticed my husband get up and go over to my father, leaning down to say something in his ear. They had long loved each other. Years earlier, they had gone on a canoe ride meticulously planned, outfitted, directed, and concluded on schedule by my sometimes maddeningly compulsive father. Everything had gone accord to plan – my *father’s* plan – throughout which Ed had been uncharacteristically compliant.

Then right at the end, when they were almost safe on dry land, Ed tipped the canoe as he got out of it and dumped my father in the river. When my father surfaced, Ed quickly said, ‘I hope that was an accident.’

That my father had laughed at this memory is a testament to his love for my husband, who in the present was kneeling down on the linoleum floor by my father’s bed to fit his head underneath my father’s bony hand. As I watched, Ed reached up and put one of his big hands on top of my father’s hand to make sure it did not slip off. Then he held still while my father’s lips moved. After he stood up, he leaned over to say something else in my father’s ear.

‘What was that?’ I asked when he came back to slump beside me again.

‘I asked him to bless me,’ Ed said. ‘I asked him to give me his blessing’” (*An Altar in the World*, 207-208).

That kind of blessing is called a benediction. It comes at the end of something, to send people on their way.

Zechariah’s *benedictus* – his benediction was for all of Israel and for his son. The long silence had been broken with a blessing.

What, I wonder, will be our *benedictus*?

When the lights go out and the curtain drops, what benediction will our lives leave in this world? What will the substance of our blessing be?

I’m guessing it won’t be much if we don’t first learn to sit with ourselves in silence.

Amen.