

The First Carols: The Benedictus

Sunday, December 1, 2019

Luke 1:68-79

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Today is the first day of Advent. Soon we will be singing Christmas carols which tell of the wondrous birth of Jesus. But did you know there are Advent carols? These songs are brimming with the expectation that God is about to do something new and glorious. They anticipate the birth of Jesus. Over the next few weeks I will introduce you to these very first carols: the *Benedictus* of Zechariah, the *Magnificat* of Mary, and the *Gloria* of the angels. We begin with the *Benedictus*, the song of Zechariah, who could sing because he learned to sit quietly, to be alone, to stop talking, and to listen. God made sure of that. This carol is the result of imposed silence and solitude, and therein lies the lesson.

Blaise Pascal, the 17th century mathematician and theologian, wrote “All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.” Our modern, digital age ensures that we are rarely quiet and rarely alone. There is so much noise in the world, and so much commotion during the Christmas season, that finding a few quiet moments can prove to be impossible. There are so many concerts, and parties, and visits by family and friends that finding a moment alone can be elusive. So, if Pascal is right — that our problems are due to our inability be quiet and alone — then we are in big trouble.

Cal Newport argues that there is tremendous value to silence and solitude. In his provocative and sobering book *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*, Newport writes that our culture is paying the price for our “compulsive connectivity.” Our constant snapping, chatting, tweeting, texting, posting, liking, and swiping have become “a nervous twitch that shatters uninterrupted time into shards too small to support the presence necessary for an intentional life.” In other words, we fill every moment with noise and activity, and this and frenetic pace is having a negative effect on us.

Newport argues that “solitude deprivation” is a significant cause of cultural anxiety, angst, and the rising rates of depression and suicide. He defines solitude deprivation as “spend[ing] close to zero time alone with your own thoughts and free from input from other minds.” The truth is, we are not wired for such constant connectivity. Our brains need time to rest, reflect, and process. Solitude and silence allow our brains the space to clarify hard problems, regulate our emotions, and strengthen relationships. Newport’s solution to the problem is to try some digital fasting: turn off the cellphone; log out from

the computer; intentionally carve out space to be, to breathe, to listen, and to reflect on the meaning of the season.

Luke’s story shows how Zechariah’s imposed silence allows for deeper reflection, deeper faith, an opportunity to listen to God, and the chance to discern what God is really doing. Zechariah, a priest, traveled to the Temple in Jerusalem to preside during the festivities. Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, had no children. Luke tells us that Elizabeth is barren, a condition considered to be a curse from God; but he also tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth were “*righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord*” (v. 6).

Zechariah is not thinking about any of this, however, when he goes into the Temple. Then, suddenly before him, appears the angel Gabriel, who says to him, “*Do not be afraid...Your prayer has been heard*” (v. 13). The angel tells Zechariah that he and his Elizabeth will have a son, who will grow up in the mold of the prophet Elijah and prepare the way for God’s Messiah. Interestingly, when Zechariah hears that he is about to get the very thing he’s been praying for his whole life, he responds not with faith, but with anxiety and doubt.

Like us, Zechariah wants some assurance, some sign that things are going to be okay. The sign that the angel offers is the one that Zechariah and many of us need if we’re going to really discern what God is up to: the sign of silence. For his unbelief, Zechariah will not be able to speak until the baby, who is to be named John, is born. I imagine Zechariah used all kinds of sign language to tell the people that he’d seen an angel! I can imagine, too, how frustrated Zechariah was at not being able to speak. But Zechariah’s silent frustration and fear turned to joy when Elizabeth reported that she was with child! While Zechariah is quiet, she exclaims with joy: “*This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people*” (v. 25).

This pregnancy was truly great news for Zechariah and Elizabeth. It would also be great news for God’s people who labored under the heel of the Romans. Just as Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed for a son, so the people of Israel prayed for God’s deliverance. Just as Zechariah and Elizabeth wondered when God would answer their prayer, so the God’s people wondered when God’s promised Messiah would come.

By Zechariah’s day, many people believed that God had been silent for too long. After the amazing liberation from Egypt and the establishment of a kingdom in the Promised Land,

Israel stopped listening to God. So, God stopped speaking and, instead, spoke through the voices of the prophets. Israel silenced many of those prophets by ignoring them or killing them. So, God sent the people into exile, far away from home, where the silence continued.

The silence, however, did not mean that God deserted the people: it just meant that the people had to intentionally *lean in* to listen to God. Silence sharpens the focus, attunes the hearing, helps us to go deeper within ourselves and to be aware of the world around us. It is only when we are silent, when we stop speaking and moving, that we can truly hear what God is saying to us.

Zechariah stayed silent for nine months. Imagine that. Nine months of simply listening. Nine months of pondering the angel's message. Nine months of listening to God and discerning what God might be up to through the birth of his long-awaited son and even longer-awaited Messiah. This silence was both a sign and a gift; it was the chance to hear the depth of God's saving mission becoming reality through Zechariah's own impossible family. It is little wonder, then, that when Zechariah finally speaks, holding his son in his arms, his first words are a song of praise. He begins: *"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has looked favorably upon his people and redeemed them"* (v. 68). Blessed. *Benedictus*.

This first Advent Carol is a song of praise and promise. In his silence, Zechariah discerned God's plan for the world. *"He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us,"* Zechariah sang. *"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"* (vv. 69-75).

Zechariah's silence is broken, and so is the silence of Israel's God, who speaks the ultimate Word in the form a Savior. After centuries of silence and waiting, God speaks a definitive word, and Zechariah lifts his voice in a carol of praise. Zechariah looks at his son, and sings, *"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 in the way of peace"* (vv. 76-79).

This baby, John, will grow to be a prophet, and like a watchman on the walls, he will announce the in-breaking of a new day and a new age. John will announce the coming of God's light to push back the darkness of sin and death and to illuminate the way of peace. The Messiah, Jesus, will lead his people into that way for he is the world's true King leading his people to God's promised Kingdom.

Zechariah's *Benedictus* is filled with praise and promise which only comes after a time of enforced silence. Advent is a time of waiting silently, expectantly for God to be revealed. Advent is a time to slow down, to be observant, to listen, and to expect the unexpected. During Advent it is possible, that in moments of silence, you may hear God speak, discern God at work, or discover your own song of praise.

It is tempting to buy into the world's narrative that pulls us in other directions during this holiday season. This alternate narrative says that we are too busy to be quiet, making sure that all the details are right for Christmas, breaking down the doors of stores for the perfect gift, clicking endlessly through online sales, and running through an excess of holiday events and expectations. We wind up exhausted, anxious, nervous, and even angry. We weren't meant to be that way.

Zechariah is struck speechless because he needs to stop and listen. Perhaps we need to once again be struck speechless by the power of this story; to be silent and listen for what God, who came to us in person in Jesus and continues to work through the Holy Spirit, is up to in our life. To do that, we need to create some space. Consider some digital fasting this Advent, lay aside the distractions, and make some time to simply "be" in God's presence. Who knows what kind of good news you will be singing about after the silence!

Prayer: We bless you, our Lord God, that you have come and have redeemed your people, raising up for us a strong savior from the family of your servant David, as you promised through your prophets long ago. You have rescued us from the grip of our enemy; you have enabled us to serve you without fear, in holiness and righteousness before you all our days. we thank you that you have given to us, your people, the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of our sins; and that by your tender mercy the Sun has risen into heaven to shine on all who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace. Amen.

Source: Newport, Cal. *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*. Portfolio/Penguin, 2019.