

I. Introduction

A. Today, I'm going to start by doing something a little different. We're going to engage a story that's very old and for some of us very familiar, but I'm hoping to **enter it in an imaginative way**. So join me in imagining with me this story.

B. *The trumpet rang out at the temple, calling us back to worship. It was the second service of the day, and I was coming to worship like I always do when my husband Zechariah is ministering.*

- 1. I don't know what you know about our form of worship, so I'll paint the picture a bit for you. After nearly forty years as a priest's wife, I know what to expect. Zechariah is one of 8,000 priests currently ministering in Israel. They have to take turns ministering in the temple, so each division is called to Jerusalem at a week at a time twice throughout the year. We come for those weeks when the clan of Abijah is ministering.*
- 2. At the beginning of the week, the priests are divided into seven smaller groups. Each of them is assigned one day to perform the many temple duties. Zechariah has to get up while it's still dark on that day that he is serving in the temple. There are many tasks for the priests to attend to from hearing confessions from those who gather to worship, to overseeing the sacrifice of the lambs, to baking the bread that is part of the sacrifice, to maintaining the fire that keeps the lambs always burning before the divine. Many of the tasks are assigned by drawing lots. On his service day after he arrives, purifies himself by bathing in the ritual bath, and clothes himself in the priestly garments he wears, the first lots are cast. Who will clean the altar? Who will collect the ashes on it from the day before? Who will polish the Menorah? Who will fill the lamp stand with oil? All of these tasks and more are determined by the lots.*
- 3. There are services every morning and the late afternoon. In each service a fresh, unblemished lamb is sacrificed. Other religious activities are happening throughout the day in the hours the temple is open. But the most sacred part of the day takes place at the 9th hour, what you might call 3 pm. This is the hour of prayer, or hour of confession, when most worshipers have finished their work for the day and can gather in the temple to name to come close and speak our truths to the Divine. It is during this time that the lot is drawn the lot for the task of the highest honor: burning the incense in the Holy of Holies. The priest who receives this task engages in the most sacred act a human being can engage in. We believe that the incense that is offered alongside the sacrifice carries the prayers of the people to God. Some even say an angel is present amidst the smoke to deliver our prayers directly to the Divine throne room. No other person comes as close to the Divine presence as the priest offering incense.*
- 4. After the priest burns the incense in the Holy of Holies and he exits the space he turns to the crowd. Some of us are kneeling, some of us holding our hands in the air. All of us are awaiting the blessing of our priest who has just been in the most sacred of spaces. He holds up his hands in a sacred sign of blessing and he pronounces words that we all receive with gratitude: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."*
- 5. There have even been stories of priests experiencing Divine revelation in the Holiest of Holies. But it is a very rare experience. This task is considered so special in fact, that each priest, if ever chosen by lottery, is only allowed to perform this task once in his life. In the nearly forty years we've been coming here, Zechariah has never been chosen.*
- 6. When Zechariah is on duty, I like to attend both services. The morning service is announced by three trumpet blasts, before the gates open wide. I usually gather with the*

other wives of Abijah priests; we head to the court of women together and stand in the front, keeping an eye out for our husbands. Some of the women are now watching their grown sons serve as priests. I have known these women for decades, I've seen their toddlers grow into some of the priests before us, or become some of the other wives standing among us. I'm not watching for my own son, though. Zechariah and I never had children.

7. It was there in the court of women I saw him that afternoon at the beginning of the hour of prayer. Zechariah had caught my eye. He had been searching for me in the crowd and when he saw me, his gaze was fierce and still. And then he held it up: He had just drawn the lot. This was the time he'd been waiting for his entire priestly career. Today my husband would enter the holy of holies.

II. By now some of you may have recognized the story my story is connected to. The tale I've been telling you is an imagined one, based on a character we find in the New Testament: a woman named Elizabeth. **Elizabeth, like many of the women in the Bible, is not the central focus of the narrative she appears in.** Her story is referenced, but generally the focus is more on others whom she is connected to, like her husband or her famous young cousin, Mary. But as we begin this season of Advent, a season of preparation for the arrival of the Divine we experience at Christmas, I found myself reading this story and noticing something I hadn't attended to before, and it made me pay closer attention to Elizabeth, and to consider a bit more deeply who she might have been and what her experience was, alongside her husband, the priest. I invite you to continue considering afresh both of their experiences as we pick up the story, now turning from hearing it in Elizabeth's imagined voice, to the voice of Luke as he writes in the first chapter of his gospel:

A. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." 18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." 19 The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

B. 21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When he did come out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was ended, he returned to his home.

C. 24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 25 "This is what the Lord has done for me in this time, when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people." (Luke 1:10-25, NRSV)

- III. So we've heard a story in two parts, the prologue I gave you in Elizabeth's imagined voice, relating some of what scholars can reconstruct about the world of worship that Zechariah and Elizabeth were apart of. The second came from the Scripture itself.
- A. For me, knowing more about the setting in which the story takes place helps me appreciate it a bit more. It makes the drama a bit more real. I imagine Zechariah emerging from the tent to the crowd who expects him to pray for them as he lifts his hands in the sign that many of us Gentiles likely associate more with Star Trek's Dr. Spock than with blessing. Observant Jewish folk may know that actor Leonard Nimoy took inspiration for his Vulcan greeting from his time spent in the synagogue as a boy. **This, along with the traditional benediction the priest speaks, was what the crowd around Zechariah at the temple would have expected.** How dramatic it must have been for Zechariah to come forth unable to speak the blessing, having to gesture wildly to try to explain what has just happened to him. How startling it must have been both for him and for his wife of decades Elizabeth.
 - B. Which perhaps helps illuminate her puzzling response; a response that's spoken so briefly it's easy to overlook. What struck me reading this passage anew this week was this small detail at the end: **"Elizabeth conceived and for five months remained in seclusion..." So why did she do that?**
 - C. While there's plenty of scholarship that can tell us about practices in the Ancient world, including all the customs I shared earlier around temple worship at that time, **we don't have any historical record of women going into seclusion because they're pregnant.** There's no evidence that Elizabeth is observing some sort of prescribed cultural custom. Her decision to withdraw from the world in some way, to "hide herself" as the Greek language here seems to communicate, seems to be a personal one. So why does she do it? And **how might her decision to withdraw, to seclude herself for a period instruct us as we begin this Advent season?**
- IV. Luke doesn't tell us directly what this seclusion is about, but I think it's worth pondering together what this little detail of the story might tell us. I'm gonna offer **a few things that come to mind for me as I consider Elizabeth** and her withdrawal for the first five months after her and her husband encounter the miraculous.
- A. Perhaps Elizabeth's withdrawal is at least in part **her way of entering the mystery** that was unfolding around her and within her. The mystery began that day that Zechariah was given the opportunity of a lifetime to burn incense in the holy of holies. He stepped into the most private, sacred space available to his people, and encountered a Divine messenger, giving him news that was confounding, and almost impossible to believe. He and Elizabeth had spent decades praying for a child, and that child had never come. They had watched their friends and peers not only have children, but they'd likely seen those children grow up and have children too. **What the angel was speaking was the stuff of Biblical legends.** It was like the stories of Abraham and Sarah who finally received a child of promise long after it had been thought impossible. It was like the conception of Samson the first Nazarite, dedicated to God in a unique way like this child was called to be. It was like Hannah and her son Samuel. And now these stories Zechariah had studied throughout his life seemed to be coming to him in the holiest of holies.
 1. But **Elizabeth wasn't in that sacred space.** She didn't have an encounter with an angel. She had to make her way through confusion as she watched her husband struggle to communicate without his voice. For her, the miraculous space she was encountering the Divine presence was not in the temple in Jerusalem. **It was within the temple of her own**

- body.** Perhaps Elizabeth withdrew from the world around her so she could focus on her own sacred space to encounter the mystery her husband had encountered with an angel.
2. I wonder what the **first signs for Elizabeth were** that the miracle that kept her husband from speaking was indeed taking place. Had she already stopped having monthly periods? Would that not have been a reliable sign of pregnancy? Did she feel nauseous as many of us mothers do in the earliest weeks? Did she feel overwhelmingly tired? **What feelings did these earliest signs bring up?** I'd imagine there may have been many: wonder, elated surprise, powerful joy to be sure, finally realizing the hope that had been deferred so long was arriving. There was also probably fear, what if the pregnancy didn't last? What if her aging body couldn't actually carry it forward? There may have also been twinges of grief - what did it mean to finally conceive this late in life. Would her and Zechariah have time to see this child into adulthood? And of course as the pregnancy continued, as her stomach swelled and her confidence grew, there was ultimately sacred gratitude, "this is what the Lord has done for me in this time".
- B. I wonder if the seclusion might also have been an **act of solidarity with her husband's silence.** Zechariah had had his voice taken away from him. And Elizabeth chooses not to be the one out in public speaking on his behalf. She enters the silence with him. Her withdrawal is her own practice of muteness.
1. There was likely a **practical wisdom to this.** If Elizabeth started going around town telling everyone why Zechariah wasn't speaking, what happened to him in the temple, that an angel told them they were expecting a baby, their friends would probably have regarded them with a mix of laughter, scorn, and potentially concern. **No one would believe this story; it was too out there.** Better to allow the story to tell itself - better to allow her swollen abdomen speak to where they had disappeared to, the next time they showed up at temple worship.
 2. In the meantime, both Elizabeth and Zechariah engaged the growing mystery through a season of solitude and silence.
- C. But **the silence doesn't last forever.** The withdrawal for each of them is only for a period, and at the end of it their voices ring out strong. Both Elizabeth and Zechariah seem to experience **productive silences.** Something deep, internal and sacred is taking place during that time - when their times of withdrawal are over, they make clear they have been profoundly moved and their faith profoundly strengthened through the season of quiet. **They move from silence to proclamation.**
1. For Zechariah - his voice comes back in the context of his **son's dedication ceremony.** After the miraculous baby is born, he is taken to the temple on his 8th day to be circumcised and officially named. The community assumes that the baby will be named after his father, as is often the custom. But remember this is no customary birth. Elizabeth tells those gathered there that the child is to be called John, and Zechariah affirms this, first in writing, and then, miraculously his voice is restored and he bursts forth with a profound song that praises God for all the ways the Divine has shown mercy to their people, including through the birth of this child and the way he is to clear the way for the other child who is to come. It's as if this nine months of silence has allowed this song to grow within him, and now it must come forth and be sung.
 2. For Elizabeth, it is the **visit of her young cousin Mary** in her sixth month of pregnancy that breaks her isolation. In the same way that Zechariah's song has been growing within him, something has grown within Elizabeth as well, alongside the child in her womb. After these five months of seclusion, she has the capacity to welcome Mary and perceive the

divine within her, just as she attunes to the divine movement in the child within her own self. Luke tells the story this way:

a) **39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." (Luke 1:39-45)**

b) Mary came to her older cousin likely terrified, after being told by her own Divine messenger that she was also with child, and that her older cousin was in her sixth month. Because Elizabeth had had the space to welcome the mystery, to quietly tend the sacred, she was able to attune to the young woman at her door in a unique way. She could bear witness to the miracle inside of each of them, which gave Mary the confidence she needed to accept her call to be the mother of Jesus and to proclaim that truth herself. After Elizabeth speaks these words of affirmation, Mary herself sings her own song - her magnificat. Is it any wonder that Mary chose to remain there for the early months of her own pregnancy? **She had found a place and a person of sanctuary, a space and a mentor for engaging the sacred process happening within herself that could help prepare her for all that was to come.**

V. Of course the Christmas narratives aren't the only examples in our tradition that speak to the power of silence and withdrawal as a tool for spiritual preparation and empowerment.

A. **Jesus spent the first 40 days of his ministry in seclusion in the wilderness.** After he emerged, he regularly withdrew from the crowds to practice quiet and to pray.

B. And the value of silence is one that spiritual seekers beyond the Jewish and Christian traditions have honored as valuable. **Gandhi famously practiced a day of silence every week.** Even in the busiest seasons when he was regularly being called upon to give speeches and advocate for the needs of his people, he refused to speak and break his practice of silence on Mondays. He knew he needed the daily rhythm of **a day to be quiet** to empower his speech and advocacy in the rest of his active life. He spoke about this practice once in this way:

1. "There is a perceptible drop in blood-pressure when I observe silence; medical friends have therefore advised me to take as much silence as I can. There is no doubt whatsoever that after every silence I feel recuperated and have greater energy for work. The output of work during silence is much greater than when I am not silent."
2. Not only did Gandhi recognize that his times of silence relaxed him and helped him focus, he also recognized the way they helped him tune into the sacred:
3. "The Divine Radio is always singing, if we could make ourselves listen to it," he said, "but it is impossible to listen without silence."

VI. So how might this speak to us today?

A. I don't know about you, but for me a meditation on Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Mary, all of whom spent the earliest months before the miraculous births they were to participate in in some space of quiet is an **invitation to find my own spaces of quiet and contemplation in the midst of the busy Advent season.**

- B. The truth is, for most of us, the month of December is anything but calm and quiet. In our culture, the weeks between Thanksgiving and December 25th are often a wild blast of activity. Some of these may feel festive and celebratory - hanging decorations, decorating cookies, attending holiday parties, shopping and wrapping - but they don't make a lot of space to enter any mysteries. They're more connected to the traditions that have built up around Christmas than the core idea at the center of it.
- C. What is that core idea? For me, at the heart of the Christmas story is **the hope that we are not alone**. Amidst unrelenting violence, persistent injustice, cynicism and heartbreak, we are not left to our own devices. The hope of this season is that **our prayers are indeed heard**, like the prayers of a couple over decades. Like the prayers of the people of God over centuries longing for breakthrough and deliverance. Like the angels declared to our ancestors, our prayers are heard and they land somewhere. A Divine heart is moved on our behalf and longs to draw close to us. At Christmas we ponder **the way that closeness comes - through both the dramatic** at times - like angel appearances, a season of imposed muteness, miraculous pregnancies - **and also the very earthy and ordinary** - the kick of a baby in the womb, a journey seeking refuge, the power of seeing another and being seen.
- D. But if we're going to notice those spaces of inbreaking, if we're going to be attuned to the sacred in our midst, **we too need space to be quiet**. We need moments of contemplation. We need experiences of solitude and seclusion. No, I'm not talking about five months or even five days. But perhaps **each of us this season can consider how we might engage the next few weeks in ways that connect us with the mystery at the heart of this season**. Can you get up fifteen or twenty minutes earlier than you normally do for a time of quiet reflection? Can you use your lunch break differently for that? Can we take time after work to turn off our phones, turn off our other devices, pause from the flood of information and just listen to the quiet before dinner? For those of us for whom the season is constantly calling us into busy activity, **what would it look like to commit to some daily practice of quiet and contemplation, even just for a brief period of time?**
- E. For me, it's often helpful in engaging with these kind of practices, **to have tools to lead that engagement**. Here at Haven, we're offering you a couple this year. In the back of the room, we're distributing daily Advent calendars with a small prompt that's intended to give you a small way to practice joy in the midst of a weary world. You could put this on your fridge or bulletin board, or follow the prompts as we post them in our Haven Facebook group. Allow each of these small moments of practicing joy to be an invitation to meet the Divine in that joy and to welcome God's presence and notice where it is already with you.
- F. For those of us who'd appreciate a bit more for contemplation, we've also shared a **beautiful devotional** from our friends at Reservoir church in Boston. The theme of this devotional is about tuning into the God who is always speaking and receiving the blessing of encountering that presence. This reminds me of the idea Gandhi spoke to - that the Divine Radio is always singing. Each day for the next weeks there is a brief Scripture reading, some comments to illuminate it, questions to ponder and prompts for prayer. I encourage you to check it out if you could use inspiration in your contemplation. Perhaps it might help you tune into the Divine Radio Frequency.
- G. However you engage it, I encourage all of us to find space this Advent not just for the festive busyness but also for the encounter of mystery. May all of us this Advent be instructed by the wisdom of Elizabeth. May we make space to pause, to collect, to ponder, and as we do, and may we be heartened by our own connection with the miracles happening in our midst. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. What do you find interesting about the muteness of Zechariah and the seclusion of Elizabeth?
2. Have you had times of practicing silence or solitude? What have they been like for you?
3. How might you want to engage these practice this Advent?