

When God Broke His Silence and then Muted the Messenger!

Luke 1:5-25

Series: *Advent 2017*

Congregational Prayer:

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in Luke 1, Luke chapter 1. Every couple of years we take the month of December to spend time digging deeper into the Christmas narrative. In your Bibles, the two main places you will find the account given of that first Christmas are Matthew 1 & 2 and Luke 1 & 2. So, we are going to take the next four weeks and consider some parts of Luke's narrative account. We start today with God breaking his 400-year silence, and subsequently silencing the messenger who received the message! It's an astounding account.

One of the great joys of looking more deeply into these texts is that the first Christmas provides a wonderful context for us to get to know our God better. We learn things about God in these narratives that jump off the page to us. By the end of our time this morning we will see God's trustworthiness and God's mercy in new and fresh ways. Just so that you know where we are going this morning, I will read the text and then walk you through the story with some helpful information which will paint a more complete picture. And then I want to end this morning by making some observations about God, and how we should respond in light of those.

Before I read the text – I wonder if you know what your name means? Mine means “gift from God” – and believe me – I got a lot of mileage out of that when I was growing up! In this narrative in Luke 1 we will come across three main names which essentially tell the story in short form. We will meet Zechariah – and his name means “Jehovah has remembered.” We will meet Elizabeth and her name means “God is an oath” or, in other words, “God is the absolutely reliable one.” And lastly, we will meet John and his name means “Jehovah has shown grace.” That is the story in short form – Jehovah has remembered, God is absolutely reliable, and Jehovah has shown grace. I'll start reading in verse 5 of chapter 1 and read through to verse 25.

We didn't take the time to read the first 4 verses of the book, but in those Luke, says that he has set out to compile an orderly account for Theophilus so that he can have certainty about the life and times and message of Jesus. So, in chapters 1 and 2 he is going to give us two parallel accounts about the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. The account of John's birth builds the narrative into a crescendo which reaches maximum volume at the birth of Jesus. And so today, we begin to build toward the birth of Christ by considering the birth of his forerunner – John.

- The Stage Set for the Prophetic Word – vs. 5-7

- There are five movements to the flow of this story in Luke 1. The stage is set for the prophetic word, and then that prophetic word is delivered, questioned, confirmed, and finally fulfilled. In verses 5-7 the stage is set for the prophetic word.
- We are told that this all happened in the days of Herod the Great. This is the Herod who was given the sword of power by the Romans to hack away at the Israelites until he was able establish a powerful governing presence. And that is precisely what he did. But it wasn't to the great Herod, or any other great self-made leader that this prophetic word was going to come. No, it was going to come to a lowly priest and his socially outcast wife.
- Zechariah was a priest in the Old Testament Jewish system, and his wife, Elizabeth was also in the lineage of Aaron – the priestly family. In other words, they were a consecrated, and set apart family for the ministry of the Lord at the Temple. Not only were they a priestly family, but the text more importantly tells us that they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. The second phrase flows out of the first one here, rather than explains the first one. So, they are not righteous before God because they were walking blamelessly in all the commandments. We know that no one is righteous, no not one. We know from other texts that even our best acts of righteousness are but filthy rags before our thrice holy God. When Luke says that they were righteous before God, he has in mind the Pauline idea of justification by faith. Paul was a close associate of Luke's and his influence is seen here. Like the righteousness of Abraham which is explained in Romans 4 as being by faith, so too, here we have Zechariah and Elizabeth taking God at His Word. They have faith in His promises to send a Messiah to save His people, and they are faithfully serving until that blessed day. And this faith in God which has justified them before God by His grace alone, is now a faith which produces these works of blamelessly keeping the law of God. In other words, because they believe God about his promises, they are trying to live each moment in obedience to his commands, not to earn their salvation, but because they believe God.
- And yet, they had no child. They were walking in obedience to God as best they knew how, and they were justified before God by faith, but they had no child. They had no child because Elizabeth was barren. And they had no hope of ever having a child now because they were both well advanced in years. Her barrenness stole their hope in the child-bearing years, and that now combines with their old age to make having a child humanly impossible.
- Elizabeth's barrenness made here a social outcast. In fact, in verse 36 Gabriel describes her as being called barren – like it was some kind of nickname or something! The blessing of God, the passing on of a birthright, the continuation of a name for yourself in the years after you passed away – all of this was

contingent on having a child, and in particular – in having a son. Therefore, to be barren was considered a great curse from God.

- But notice that this is not the case here for Elizabeth and Zechariah. No matter what others thought, their childlessness was not a curse from God. They were righteous before Him and blameless in their keeping of the law. In other words, in case you might miss the point – godliness is no safeguard against sorrow and suffering, and sorrow and suffering are no proof of ungodliness. If you are suffering, this is not necessarily because you are ungodly. And if you are godly, you are not guaranteed to not suffer. In fact, as we will see, God used this suffering of barrenness to actually advance his plans for saving His people. Elizabeth's suffering provided the glorious context for God to intervene. The situation was humanly impossible, and only divinely possible. Her suffering became the situational foundation for this magnificent work of God to advance His work to save His people. By the way, Zechariah's name means – Yahweh has remembered, and Elizabeth's name means, "God is absolutely reliable." That is what we see played out in verses 8-17 as God's breaks his silence and delivers his first prophetic word in 400 years.
- The Prophetic Word Delivered – vs. 8-17
 - God breaks his silence by sending Gabriel to intersect Zechariah in the Temple. Gabriel is one of 2 angels who are actually named in the Scripture. He last appeared in Daniel's day to interpret the vision of Daniel 8 and the prophecy of Daniel 9. Notice that he intersects Zechariah at the altar of incense inside the Holy Place of the Temple. This is the large room of the Temple that only the priests were allowed to go into. At the opposite end of the room from where the priest entered, there was a massive curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, where God's manifest glory rested on the Ark of the Covenant. In front of that curtain stood the Altar of Incense. Two times a day one of the priests would enter the Holy Place and burn incense on the Altar of Incense. This was a pleasing aroma to the Lord early in the morning and then mid-afternoon. The incense which was burned was symbolic of the prayers of the people as they rose into the presence of God and were accepted by Him. As the priest entered to do this, a crowd of faithful worshipers were in the courtyard praying. And what were they praying? Well, they were asking God to keep His promise and send the Messiah. This was the next part of God's plan, and the children of Israel in the First Century were incredibly zealous for the soon return of the Messiah. And so, as the priest offered the incense, the people prayed and asked God to keep His promises of old.
 - There were so many priests that they were split into various times of duty. Each priestly family served 2 times a year for one week at a time. While they served at the Temple, they drew lots of the special priestly functions – like burning incense in the Holy Place twice a day. Well, as God would have it, on this day,

Zechariah's lot was chosen, and he was to go in before the presence of God and burn incense on the altar of incense. It is hard to capture the gravity and uniqueness of this moment. This was a once in a lifetime deal for Zechariah.

Because they were so many priests, if your lot was drawn for this duty, you could never do it again. This is the moment of moments for Zechariah's priesthood.

- And in this most amazing of moments, Zechariah is confronted with a messenger from the God who has not directly spoken with man for 400 years, and Zechariah's first reaction is to be terrified. In fact, fear is going to be the recurring response of people to the many messengers sent from God over the next two chapters. Mary will be afraid when Gabriel appears to her, and the shepherds will be filled with great fear when an angel of the Lord appears to them. When their faith is met with the sight of God's glorious messengers they are naturally greatly afraid. But the first words out of Gabriel's mouth to Zechariah are words of comfort – do not be afraid, for your prayer has been heard. God hears and answers our prayers. This prophetic word which is to come from Gabriel is in response to the prayers of God's people – and to Zechariah and Elizabeth in particular.
- This prophetic word is that Elizabeth will have a baby boy and they are to name him John. And this boy will not just be a miracle baby born to them in their barren old age, but he will also be the child promised by the prophet Malachi – the last prophetic voice of the Old Testament era. Here are the final two verses of his prophecy, the final words of God to man until this moment of Gabriel speaking to Zechariah in Luke 1. Malachi 4:5-6 says, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."
- God hasn't missed a beat, has He? He hasn't lost his place in the book of prophetic history or in the almanac of the salvation of His people. Though 400 years have passed, he picks up right where he left off. He tells Zechariah – the Elijah that Malachi promised is going to be your son. He will be set apart from birth for this special prophetic ministry. Instead of being filled with and influenced by and empowered with the wine of the world, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit of God. His ministry will affect a great movement of joy and gladness as people are turned from their selfish rebellion and are returned to the Lord and restored to one another. Notice that one of the key signs of this revival of God's people will be renewed relationships between fathers and children. This will be evidence of hearts that are seeking to return to God as they prepare themselves for the visitation of the Messiah.
- And this also is a key part to the prophetic word given to Zechariah – his son is not the Messiah, but the one who will prepare the way for the Messiah. He will be great and there will be much joy and rejoicing over him precisely because he is pointing ahead to one that is greater than him. So, this great son of Zechariah's

will just be the beginning of God's work to redeem His people through One who is yet greater than John.

- I can't imagine this moment for Zechariah. Here he is, in the Holy Place before the altar of Incense – the most holy moment in all of his life for any normal priest – and now God sends a messenger to him and tells him that the wait is over – the forerunner is coming, and he will be your son through God's miraculous intervention in your wife's barrenness. How would you respond to this?
- The Prophetic Word Questioned – vs. 18
 - Well, maybe before Zechariah even knew what he was saying, he questioned Gabriel about how this could even be true. The word construction in verse 18 makes clear that he is struggling to believe that this can even happen. When he says, how shall I know this – he is really asking – how will this come to be realized? How can I be certain that it will all go according to this plan because I am old and my wife is old and she is barren . . . how can this possibly happen!
- The Prophetic Word Confirmed – vs. 19-23
 - But as soon as this prophetic word is questioned it is subsequently confirmed. In a gentle rebuke, Gabriel reminds Zechariah where he has come from. This is significant because Zechariah is enamored with the place he is currently standing – just feet from the manifest presence of God on earth behind this massive curtain which runs floor to ceiling just inches in front of him. But Gabriel reminds him that this Temple is but a shadow of the real throne of God, and by the way – that is where Gabriel just was – in the very presence of God. And he has been sent by God to bring this good news to Zechariah. The contrast between verses 18 and 19 is the contrast between the uncertainty of Zechariah and the absolute certainty of Gabriel.
 - And Zechariah's uncertainty is then met with the consequence of having his own mouth stopped. So, the God who has voluntarily silenced himself for such a time as this, has now spoken the next part of his message for the furtherance of his plan. But then he mutes the messenger he's given the message to! It's a pretty incredible moment actually. And Gabriel makes it clear in verse 20 that he is being muted because he did not believe Gabriel's words of prophecy about his coming son.
 - You would think that this would oppose the effectiveness of God's prophetic voice through Zechariah. Give him a message to proclaim and then take his voice away? That doesn't sound like a very effective way to communicate. But contrary to how we think, God took this and expanded the effectiveness of the prophetic Word. So, in the Temple worship, the priest was to go into the Holy Place and burn incense on the Altar of Incense and then come back out and from the steps of the Temple he was to pronounce the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6 over the people. But because of the angelic messenger, Zechariah is delayed in the Temple, and so the people's awareness was heightened. They were quickly shaken out of

the routine worship – going through the motions – mentality. Now, they knew something strange was happening, but they didn't know how strange, until Zechariah finally came out of the Temple minutes after he was supposed to, and couldn't speak. He couldn't pronounce the blessing over them and the text says that he kept making signs to them to tell them that he had seen a vision in the Temple. That must have been quite the game of charades!

- Well, all of this worked together to further confirm the prophetic word that Zechariah received. Everyday he was mute was a day in which his belief was strengthened that it would all happen just as Gabriel had said.
- The Prophetic Word Fulfilled – vs. 24-25
 - And then in verses 24-25 the prophetic word is fulfilled. Zechariah's week of service is ended and so he goes home, and the next thing we are told is that Elizabeth conceived, and subsequently hides herself for the next 5 months. We aren't told why she did this, but we know that in some way it was relating to the disgrace of her barrenness. She will not be seen again in public until it is obvious to all that the Lord has removed her barrenness with this pregnancy. What the text does tell us is that she definitely believed all that Zechariah explained to her about this. She knew this baby was from the Lord, and she believed that he would be the forerunner to the Messiah.
 - This becomes especially obvious down in verse 57 when Elizabeth gives birth to a son and she calls his name John. We won't take the time to read it, but Zechariah isn't given his speech back right away when John is born. It was another 8 days until the circumcision of the baby when they traditionally settled on a name for the boy. When Elizabeth said that she wanted to name him John, the neighbors and relatives couldn't understand because that was not a family name. So, they asked Zechariah what he wanted, and he asked for a tablet and wrote "His name is John." I love that declaration of faith. He was not naming him John, he was rather simply agreeing with what God had already named the child – John!
 - And immediately Zechariah's tongue was loosed, and he broke out into great blessing of God. Finally – after over 9 months of silence, he is finally able to speak and tell everyone all about the great blessing of God. The result of this whole ordeal is that the people were afraid because they understood this was something God was doing. The news spread to all the hill country of Judea and everyone who heard the story put it deep in their hearts as their hope for the soon coming Messiah increased. They realized that this John was a special baby sent from God! God had broken his prophetic silence after 400 years, and then had muted the messenger of that prophetic word, and all of it combined to turn the people's hearts more toward God as they awaited God's further work.
 - So, what do we learn about God from this account, and how does this move us our hearts to believe and obey? Well, we learn that God keeps His Word exactly and extends His mercy sympathetically.

I. God Keeps His Word Exactly

a. At just the right time in human history, God resumes his prophetic word. A thousand years are as one day and a day as a thousand years with our Lord, and so the last words of his last prophet of the Old Testament are a recent memory for our Lord, not a distant one. He does not forget. He does not lose his place in the timeline. He does not need alerted or reminded. He is a God of unstoppable order and perfect timing. His prophetic Word will never fail. It never has, and it never will. That is what we learn from this account of Zechariah and Elizabeth. God is a promise making and a promise keeping God, and he does this exactly – to the very letter of His promise.

b. Therefore:

i. We Must Believe His Word

1. Therefore, we must believe His Word. It only makes sense for us to take God at His Word then and order our lives according to His very exact promises of how things will continue and will go. Zechariah & Elizabeth were part of a faithful remnant in Israel who were more than religiously active. They were faith-filled believers that God was going to keep His promises of old. And so, they looked to the Law and the Prophets to guide their lives as they hoped in God for a full and final redeemer.
2. You see, they were not left without a word from God. In one sense God was silent, but in a greater sense God had clearly spoken. In Matthew 11:13 Jesus says that the Law and the Prophets prophesied until John. In other words, the faith-filled believers like Zechariah and Elizabeth had plenty of prophecy to live by. God had made clear in 39 books of Old Testament Scripture what he had done in the world, what he was currently doing, and what he planned to do in the days to come. So, they set their heart fully on the future grace of the coming Messiah, and they lived each day in light of this hope. In other words – they believed God's Word.
3. And so must we. God has now been prophetically silent for almost 2000 years. That's 5 times as long as he was between Malachi and John. Does this make us hopeless and faithless? No, we have many clear prophetic words to guide us through this time of prophetic silence. God is not silent to us. He has given us a book full of promises about his current and future work. So, we must set our hearts upon this Word, like Zechariah and Elizabeth did, and we must take God at His Word. Let me just point you to two of those words. Jesus promised in Matthew 16 that he would build His Church. We learn from the book of Acts and the following epistles

that God intends to build the Church around the world until the day of Christ's return. So, the prophetic voice of God should penetrate our hearts and make us passionate about God's clear plan to build His church in the age of grace. If we are to walk in faithfulness like Zechariah and Elizabeth, then we are going to seek to understand this promise and we will seek to live each day of life on this earth as a steward of this promise. In other words, we will want to be a part of God keeping this promise, must like Zechariah and Elizabeth were directly involved in God keeping his promise of the forerunner. You are not going to have a miracle baby who will set the world on fire – but you do get to daily determine how much you will invest yourself in the work of the Great commission and the great commandment as God goes about the keeping of His promise to build His Church.

4. We are also given the prophetic promise that Jesus is coming again. In fact, in Luke's second book – the book of Acts – an angelic messenger appears to the disciples as they gaze into heaven at the Ascension of Christ and he says to them – “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” That is a prophetic promise that is clarified and repeated throughout the epistles, and we must set our hope fully on this moment of future grace. We must live today as though it might be the day of Christ's return, and we must purify our lives and pursue grace to live today in a way which we wished we would have on the day Christ does come back. He is coming, and we must take God as His Word!
- ii. We Must Seek to be Blameless
 1. Connected to this is that we must also seek to be blameless. This hope of future grace at the soon return of our Lord should drive our holiness. That is what we learned last week from 1 Peter. Hope and holiness go hand in hand. They feed one another and support one another. If I am full of confident hope in the grace to be brought at the revelation of Jesus Christ, then I will seek to be holy as God is holy.
 2. That is the testimony of Zechariah and Elizabeth. They believed the promise of coming redeemer, and so their lives were righteous before God by faith, and blameless before God by the pursuit of holy living. Their hope fueled their holiness. That is how it works, and this is how it must work for us. So, in this year's season of advent – which is nothing more than a season of expectation – of hope – will you pursue greater holiness as your hope is increased?

Ask God to fan the flame of your joy-filled expectation in the Second Coming of Christ as we reflect upon and remember His First Coming. And ask God to make you more holy as your hope in future grace grows.

iii. We Must Trust Him With Our Suffering

1. And, in light of the fact that God keeps His Word exactly, we must also trust Him with our suffering. If we learn anything super practical from Zechariah and Elizabeth it is that saving faith in God's redeemer does not protect you from suffering, and if you suffer it is not a sure sign that you are ungodly and cursed by God. Rather, God is often using the suffering of His people to further advance His plan of salvation. Because Zechariah and Elizabeth were barren and humanly hopeless of ever having a child, they were all the more fervent in their longing for God's work to save. They were daily aware that they lived in a broken and fallen world, and they wanted God to finally and fully fix it.
2. We see this in them in that they were fervent in prayer. Gabriel's first words of encouragement to Zechariah were – your prayers are answered. And I am convinced that Zechariah had not just prayed for a child, but he had prayed often for The Child – The Messiah. So, the suffering they were entrusted with fed their growing appetite for God's Messiah to come. Their acute pain gave them increased faith in God's future grace. And God used this to advance his work of salvation.
3. This is what God does. He never wastes our suffering. He always has a plan for it. He is always furthering and advancing the Gospel through our suffering. It is either being advanced deeper into our souls, or it is being advanced into the lives of others who need to hear and who need to believe – or it is advancing both ways. God never wastes our suffering. Can you trust Him with it? How would you know if you were? Well, one way to know would be to look at how you pray about it. If God answered your prayers about your suffering would your here and now life simply improve, or if he answered your prayers, would the Gospel advance regardless of whether or not your here and now life improved? Can you trust God with your suffering? Zechariah & Elizabeth did.

II. God Extends His Mercy Sympathetically

- a. The second thing we learn about God from this text is that God extends His mercy sympathetically. What I mean by that is that God looks upon the humble and those of lowly estate – and it is they who receive the abundance of God's mercy. So, in our text, it isn't Herod the Great who receives God's mercy, but it is

a lowly priest and his socially excluded wife. And their son who is coming – John – is going to follow in their footsteps of deep consecration to the Lord coupled with being socially maladjusted. He will be kept from many of the pleasures of this life and he will live in the wilderness and live off the land – and yet he will be great in the service of the Lord. Jesus will tell us many times that those who are great must be those who are more greatly humble before God and man. Those who will be exalted will be those who are humbled. And this is John. I think he was the most obviously humble man in the New Testament, which is proven by Jesus calling him the greatest man ever born of a woman. God delights in the humble and extends mercy to them.

- b. This will be emphasized throughout Luke's Gospel, especially as it relates to the Temple. Luke will include more in His Gospel relating to the Temple than any of the other Gospel writers. And he does that because he intends to communicate that Jesus is the Great High Priest of His people who can sympathize with all their weaknesses and truly save them from all their sins. Luke's Gospel begins in the Temple – as we have seen this morning – and it ends in the Temple after the ascension of Jesus as his disciples are continually in the Temple blessing God. It will be in Luke that we will read of the humble Simeon and Anna in the Temple waiting for God to fulfill His promise. It will be in Luke that Jesus will tell the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector who come to pray at the Temple. The proud Pharisee's prayer is rejected, but the contrite tax collector goes home justified by his humble faith. All of this combines in this Gospel to show you that God extends his mercy sympathetically to the humble and the broken.
- c. His mercy is not reserved for those who have it all together and who can somehow earn His forgiveness and His justification. No, God asks us to humble ourselves – admit that we are not able to earn our salvation nor guarantee our sanctification. He wants us to look to Him in faith – believing His promises, and walking fervently in humble godliness. It is those to whom He shows great mercy – to the Zechariah's and the Elizabeth's of the world.

Conclusion: Is that you? Are you humble and broken and yet full of faith in a promise making and promise keeping God? May God increase His mercy to us!