

“Gift from Elsewhere”
Luke 1:68-79
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2nd Sunday in Advent
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There’s a fantasy I have occasionally some Friday afternoons when I’m working on the sermon. The dream is that I wake up on Sunday morning and there’s snow on the ground - piles and piles of it so high that no one can get to church. Exiled at home by some action from “elsewhere,” I don’t have to worry about what I have to say. The proclamation has been silenced.

I don’t know how common is this fantasy among preachers. I suspect the fantasy that the preacher isn’t able to preach is more common among the laity. But I have that dream on occasion.

I wonder if Zechariah harbored the same fantasy. He is called to teach and to preach the ways of God. To preach the saving work of God in the past so that people can trust the saving work of God in the present. And like any proclaimer of God’s good news who pays attention to the people around him, I imagine that he finds himself doubting. Doubting the power of God to bring to fruition the promises that have been spoken.

Maybe like others of us, whose doubt doesn’t rise primarily from abstract questions, Zechariah’s doubt rose from the pain that any pastor with half a heart shares with his or her people. You can imagine Zechariah teaching God’s gift of peace in the same week that he’s visiting with a mother torn up over domestic violence experienced by her child. You can imagine Zechariah preaching God’s gift of peace in the same week he’s adding to the prayer list families whose loved ones will be sent to fight in a deepening war. You can imagine Zechariah studying God’s promises of peace while he’s visiting with people who have been the victims of crime, who have seen violence in the streets, who know as much fear as they do security.

I can imagine that Zechariah’s lived reality threatened to overwhelm the promises that he was called to preach, to teach, and for which he was called to lead the people in praise. Perhaps that internal doubt was so strong that his forced silence was less of a punishment and more of a gift. He didn’t have to stand before his congregation and preach a way of peace while politicians prepared the nation for more war. He didn’t have to stand before his congregation and preach God’s promised deliverance while violence touched spouses in their homes, or citizens walking on the streets, or flashed across their TV screens. Zechariah, didn’t have to say anything - he was *unable* to speak.

Maybe we can benefit from that kind of silence in the church. Whether your exile comes from being snowed in at home or forbidden to speak by an angel maybe silence isn’t such a bad thing if you are otherwise tempted to speak flowery words of peace that seem more like a dream than a possibility. Because most of us are hungry for more than just words of assurance, words of promise, words of hope. More than just words of spin even and especially when they come from the pulpit. We don’t just want words about peace, we want peace. We don’t want words about

God's saving work, we want to see evidence of God's saving work. We don't want to *feel* safe, we want to *be* safe.

In his silence, Zechariah had un-pressured time to weigh the promises God had made on the one hand with their chances of being fulfilled on the other. This proclaimer didn't have anything else to do. Deadlines had been disappeared from his calendar. Phone messages could not be returned. What had kept him busy, kept him feeling confident and powerful in the world had been taken away. None of the usual work that he spent his days accomplishing was available to him. He didn't have anything else to do.

I'm guessing in those first days of silence he was frightened. That's what I've heard from some people in similar situations. You're clicking along like usual, and an accident, or an illness, or a layoff disrupts all the routines of your life. The appointments that once were so important to keep, the meetings so critical to make, the paperwork so crucial to get done are suddenly stripped from you along with the self-confidence that you attached to your industrious nature. And you are surprised at the depth of the fears that you once skimmed over.

In his forced silence, Zechariah didn't have the luxury of skimming over the surface of his fears. He had to deal with them. He couldn't paper over the doubts in his heart. He had to know them. He couldn't avoid the realities of the world that contradicted God's promises. He had to stew with them for a long while.

The surprising thing about this time of doubt and fear is that it is, in Zechariah's case, designed by God. It's God who clears away the clutter and deepens the space for doubt. It's God who turns on the light so Zechariah can't hide from his fear. Apparently God is not intimidated by our doubting, our mulling over of the tension between promise and reality, between what is and what is to come.

And that's a good thing that God is not intimidated by our doubting on this 2nd Sunday in Advent when we contemplate the promise of peace. It's a good thing when it comes to the violence that we sometimes see in families that we know or we love. We wrestle with the promise of peace and the reality of its absence. It's a good thing when it comes to the violence that we see around us. We wrestle with the coming of the Prince of Peace while gunshots ring out on army bases or on school campuses or dangerously close to us on the street. It's a good thing when it comes to the violence we see in our world. We wrestle with the promise of nations beating their swords into plowshares in a week when the anti-war president announces troop escalation. It's a good thing God is not intimidated by our doubting as we wonder, is the promise of peace, a fantasy to be shared only by the young? Is it a denial of the truth? Is it a dream that cannot survive outside a world of dreams?

Something happened to Zechariah in his forced silence. The text doesn't tell us what it was. Maybe you have your own ideas.

But when I woke up this morning and there wasn't much snow on the ground I was glad about it. Because in the silence of contemplation, of waiting, of pondering just how far we are from peace in our families, at home, and abroad, I realized just how often *God's peace comes to find us*. I

remembered the young men I know who God redeemed out of gangs in our city so that they might teach boys who look up to them the ways of peace. I remembered the hundreds of kids – maybe thousands - who have been told they are valuable every week in our tutoring program for the past 45 years. I remembered many who have struggled as victims of violence in our congregation and the shoulders they have leaned on in our church. I thought about the wars that have been shortened if not stopped because of public witness, the courage that only God could sustain in time of national thirst for blood. I listened closely to the President's plan for Afghanistan this week and though I believe in building schools over sending troops, I think the better way is cleaning water over sending guns, in the details that followed I heard about troops who will be doing social work, doing development work - it's the first time in eight years that I've heard credible military plans that emphasize non-violent investment in a people. I thought about the gift of the children in this church – tangible grace in our community – assurance that God's creative goodness is still keeping promises, sending us miracles to remind us of our better natures.

I realized that I spend so much time agonizing over how I can do more to bring about peace, how we can do more to promote peace that I don't always see the countless times that peace is given to us - a gift, undeserved, unanticipated.

And if we are not able to see that - if we are too doubtful because our protests don't seem to lead to dramatic ends to wars. If we are doubtful because our prayers don't seem to end damage in marriages of our family or our friends. If we are doubtful because we just don't see how peace could happen here or a few blocks down the street, or around the world,

maybe we need to be caught by some act from elsewhere, to be given permission to cancel some appointments, to be forced to slow down the frenzied pace, to wait to return some phone calls, to wait in silence so that we can pay attention long enough to our fears to notice that they do not have the last word in God's light, to notice that we are visited by peace more often than we imagine. It is a gift that comes to us from elsewhere, waiting to be received by nations, and cities, and congregations, and you and me.

It's that awareness that can turn our silence into courageous proclamation. Proclamation that knows without a doubt that the dawn from on high will break upon us. That peace is not a dream. That the work of our faith is not driven by exhaustive desperation but from a well whose source comes from elsewhere.

Vaclav Havel, before he became president of the Czech Republic, in fact, before the "velvet revolution," granted interviews later published in his book *Disturbing the Peace* (reprint, New York: Vintage, 1991). He writes (181-82):

Hope is . . . not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as

optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from "elsewhere." It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.¹

From elsewhere came a gift to Zechariah – a child of promise. From elsewhere would come another gift to Mary and Joseph and to the whole world. While disciples mourned in a locked room their Savior's death, from elsewhere came a gift. When Jesus departed from them again, from elsewhere came a gift like the mighty rush of a wind. I have seen that gift come from elsewhere. Maybe you've seen it too. It comes every day to those of us who are prepared to receive it into our hearts and trust it in our lives:

“to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadows of death to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

It precedes every proclamation. Sometimes it comes in silence, an undeserved, unanticipated gift.

¹ I am indebted to Rev. Kathryn Johnston, for this connection and its connection to Advent hope.