



**December 15, 2013**

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**“His Name is John” – Luke 1:57-66**

We started Advent with Joseph’s journey of faith from being certain about what he thought he knew about God to a willingness to be surprised by God’s new gift of salvation through Jesus in a very unconventional way – a journey central to our own growth in Christ. Then, last week, we followed Mary’s journey of discovery that anyone, no matter how humanly insignificant, can be part of the great works of God – even a poor, pregnant teenage girl, even to us, and that even we can magnify, make clearer those God-moments when we experience them, so that God can, as our Faith Formation motto says, God can “grow our souls.” Now we come to the journey of Zachariah, one of my favorite Bible figures.

We’re coming in at the middle of the story here. Before, Luke tells us that Zachariah, a hereditary priest, and his wife Elizabeth, were childless, a very serious social issue at the time. We’re also told that they’re old, but we don’t know how old – “old” is pretty relative anyway, as we all know here! But it seems pretty clear that they’ve been on their own, just the two of them, for decades. So when Zachariah has a vision while serving his rotation in the Jerusalem Temple: the angel

Gabriel announcing to him that he's going to be a father, he's vocally skeptical – “How can this be? For I am an old man, and my wife is an old woman” (good thing Elizabeth wasn't around to hear him say that!) . Because of this doubt, Gabriel takes away Zachariah's voice, after telling Zachariah that he must name the child to be born John – John, better known to us as John the Baptist.

In today's passage, Zachariah speaks again. But it's the in-between time, what happens in the months between losing and regaining his voice, that our journey takes place.

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The between-the-lines, unwritten story here is about being alone. Human beings were meant to be in community, talking to and with each other, growing together. God himself said after creating Adam that “It is not good that the man be alone,” and I am not about to argue with God. We are most human when we are together with other humans: it brings out the best in us (and the worst, but that's another sermon...). There is something particularly isolating about losing your ability to speak. I know a bit of this, personally.

My senior year of college, I developed a node on one of my vocal chords. It was awful – if I tried to sing a scale, one note just wouldn't come out, just air. Tough for a singer and music major! The cure was even worse: I was told not to use my voice in any way for two weeks. Two weeks! I had rehearsals, concerts. And how can you not talk for

two weeks in college, with all the exciting and often trivial stuff there is to talk about? By the time it was over, my girlfriend (this was years before I met you, honey) was ready to kill me, and I was ready to climb the walls.

There are four major, life-absorbing “D’s” in Green Valley, all of which impose unasked for isolation from others: Depression, Divorce, Death, and Dementia. They all have one major effect in common: they all isolate the sufferer or their loved ones, or both. This time of year, so overburdened with memories of things done together and joys past, is one time when these four “D’s” are painfully present.

Now, it seems to me that isolation is an important sub-text in this story: as we’ve already seen, Zachariah and Elizabeth were childless, and had long since grown used to each other’s ways – even the most intimate couple has times when they are just two individual people; and when Z comes back from his two weeks of “reserve duty,” his punishing silence must have been excruciating for them both, and could not have helped but affect their relationship.

Being alone, *feeling* alone, against our will, without our permission, is terrible. But even worse is the illusion that we can only know the truth about ourselves by ourselves, alone – that we can and must “go it alone.” Surprisingly, being alone is seen as a way to try to find out who we really are. We can try to act as if we are discreet

individuals, unconnected to anyone or anything. My generation, the Baby Boomers, is especially prone to this. The first line of one of the iconic songs of the sixties, Joni Mitchell's "Woodstock," goes: "I came upon a child of god/he was walking along the road/and when I asked him 'tell me, where are you going?'/this he told me: I'm going down to Yasgur's farm/gonna play in a rock and roll band/gonna live out on the land/and set my soul free. We are stardust; we are golden: and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden."

Going back to the garden. She means, the garden of Eden, that perfect place that God created just for that first human being. How are we supposed to get there? Set our souls free. And although the song keeps saying, "we," it means individuals: each soul, one at a time, along, travelling back to that primordial perfection of one, lone person

The problem is, God saw that that wasn't good, and changed it, created community.

Still, that was the message that grew from the sixties and seventies: Go off by yourself and get your together, find yourself inside yourself. Given that, it's not surprising Boomers are considered self-centered, is it?

But as attractive as going off to discover who you really are might sound, it's not what we're made for. It most certainly isn't the Christian message: even the hermits who went off to live alone in the desert did so

not to find themselves, but to eliminate the distractions that kept them, in their own opinion, from fully knowing God. They did this because Christianity teaches us that the only way we can fully know ourselves is by knowing God. But they missed one crucial point: God came to us as one of us, the reason for the season, so that we could finally realize that God is always with us and among us: that we are never truly alone, yes, but also that God is revealed to us in others, which is why Jesus sent us the Holy Spirit to give us his presence in the people in our lives.

“Wherever two or more are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of you.”

This is Zachariah’s journey: he and Elizabeth had set aside a life to themselves, each to their own business, each into themselves. Not their choice, but their lot. And they had become accustomed to it.

Then along comes God and messes all that up! It may not be perfect, but it’s what they know. That’s the subtext of Zachariah’s comment to Gabriel: “What? A son? Now? You’re kidding, right?” And so Zachariah has his voice taken away, and becomes even more alone.

There are lots of ways of being alone, and many of them involve being around other people. Alone in a crowd. Voiceless. That’s part of the lesson, the journey that Zachariah makes: unable to participate fully in life because he no longer can communicate, he has to find his way back to community.

Right here in this room right now are dozens of people who know what it's like to be alone in a crowd, whether you've lost someone or yourself to death, divorce, dementia, depression – all those horrible “d's.” How easy it is for you and me to shrink away ourselves, trim back our relationships with others, become more isolated ourselves because of our loss, our lot. Just like Zechariah.

But. And it's a big but. Z has months to consider this, months to consider God and God's mysterious ways, months to rethink himself. A long trip, indeed. The in-between time: between his vision and today's story.

So, back to our reading this morning. The neighbors are getting ready to name Zachariah and Elizabeth's boy. The custom was to name children using names already in the family; for example, both John and Jesus were extremely common names then, as were Simon and Mary and Elizabeth. So, naturally, when Elizabeth somehow manages to survive childbirth, the crowd of women around all want to know what this child's name will be. That's the father's privilege, but Zachariah still can't talk, so they ask Elizabeth, who tells them, “John.”

Which causes some commotion. It's just not right, like one of your grandchildren naming their new daughter “Stardust.” At least call him Zachariah, after his dad, poor thing!

And here's where Zachariah completes his journey: he submits to God's will, finally and fully, and suddenly his voice returns! He says, "His name is John."

That's our journey today, too. When we submit to God's will in our lives, stop trying to go it alone, reject the artificial isolation of the four "D's," then we, too, find our own voices, and can begin to know who we were truly meant to be.

It's never too late! God's full of surprises, no matter how old you are – after all, look at Elizabeth! None of us will have to endure what she did in this voyage, but even now is not too late to know yourself and your place in God and God's community.

Now, we're past the half-way mark of our Advent journey, our trip of discovery leading to the celebration of Jesus' birth. And here lies joy.

Joy in knowing we are never truly alone; joy in knowing we can experience God through others; joy in know that the hard places of life need not bring an end to our part in fulfilling God's purposes.