

If pastors were honest about it, Zechariah is probably one of the stories we like the least. He is one of our own, a priest, serving God in the temple in Jerusalem. Remember back to your readings in Exodus about how the priests function in the temple. One priest would go in and make the offering. Possible encounters with the Divine were not taken lightly, so only trained professional priests did this. “Do not try this at home” might be the sign on the wall.

So, Zechariah walks in to the place where God lives, and the divine messenger walks in the door and speaks to him. But Zechariah doesn't quite believe him.

Now, if Zechariah had encountered this angel in the produce section of Albertsons, or while out for a run on the greenbelt, we could sympathize with him a little more. Because we can understand missing the Divine while you are in the midst of your busy life.

But he's *in the temple*. This is why pastors are uneasy about this text. We spend a lot of time in God's house. We listen for God. Except of course, for when the divine speaks to us clearly and we miss it all together.

Let's look at what the angel says.

“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. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 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. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 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.”

All of the usual angel stuff—do not be afraid, etc, etc. But some very specific instructions too—your prayer has been heard. Your wife will bear a son. His name will be John. He must never drink wine or strong drink. He will be willed with the Holy Spirit even before he is born...

But Zechariah, even in the midst of the divine presence, can't put aside human details. Like Sarah and Abraham before him, and like us after, perhaps, Zechariah allows very human details and limitations to question God's movement in the world. “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years....”

He doesn't die in his encounter with the Divine. But he does lose his voice. He doesn't say another word until John is born.

Losing your voice, your ability to speak words that matter, is not a small consequence.

Most of the things for which I use my voice may not be too important. I order a sandwich at a restaurant. Or I remind my kids that they need to wear long pants and coats when it is 19 degrees outside.

But our voices do matter. Calling our family to see how they are doing and to tell them we love them. Speaking truth to right wrongs or stop injustice. Telling others where we have seen God active in our lives.

Losing your voice for 9 months would give you ample time, I suspect, to think about what you really want to say.

And Zechariah finally gets his voice back when he verifies that this child is to be called John, as the angel said, even though everyone thought his name should be Zechariah Junior.

And, once he has his voice back, did you notice what he said? Twelve verses of poetry so beautiful that I wonder if he had been composing it in silence those nine months.

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. 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.

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 into the way of peace."

Zechariah's voice is back and it bursts forth in praise and hope and promise and thanks. And he also recognizes something about his son, John. Zechariah and Elizabeth may have been priestly class, but this child of their old age was something else all together. Zechariah recognizes that John will be the prophet of God. And he connects John to the Old Testament prophets before him. Malachi, which you heard today, spoke of a messenger who would prepare the way of God.

Malachi dates from the time of Ezra, which you have just finished in your Year of the Bible readings. His name actually means “my messenger” and he had an important message to share with God’s people, weary with exile, conquest, and displacement. “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”

I wonder if Zechariah, during his nine months of silence, and after coming to terms with Elizabeth and Mary’s pregnancies, poured over these prophetic passages, seeking to understand what was to come. Malachi’s prophecy, to which Zechariah connects his son by calling John the one who will prepare the way, is good news, in a sort of frightening way.

The Lord we seek will suddenly come to his temple. There’s the good news. God will become flesh and pitch a tent among mortals. That’s the good news for which we’re preparing now. Jesus’ birth, as far as Zechariah saw it, was God suddenly coming to his temple.

But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” That’s the part of Malachi’s prophecy that gives me pause. If you are familiar with Handel’s Messiah, this prophecy is sung by a deep male voice. I can’t read the words without hearing the soloist in my childhood church singing the part. Handel wrote the music for that prophecy well because it is beautiful and dark and kind of scary. And I’m sure the man who sang that role each year is the nicest person, but I confess to always being a little afraid of a man who would deliver such a prophecy.

But remember for Zechariah, this prophecy of Malachi is all good news. “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them!”

Redemption.

I know that this has been a difficult year for some of you. The Israelites, too, lived through successive bad years. And I think what Malachi would say to you is “don’t lose hope.” Trust God. Trust that there is a

future with hope. Winston Churchill is quoted as saying, “if you’re going through hell, keep going”.

It is not a place where you want to stop.

But Advent hope is for this. Awaiting both the birth of God-with-us, and the return of God, means that we trust God has envisioned a future for us with hope and redemption.

Redemption.

The truth is that redemption sometimes requires a refiner’s fire. To see a beautiful metal, like silver or gold, you have to burn away the impurities. You have to be willing to let go of all of the things to which you cling—illusions of control, or pride, or even the certainty of how the future is supposed to unfold—all of those impurities need to burn away in the refiners fire, leaving you with a beautiful clarity that you can rely on God. And, Advent hope is also a reminder that God’s restoration happens outside of our control. We don’t get to decide what goes in to the refiner’s fire. We are what goes in to the fire. We are the ones in need of refining.

Maybe Zechariah’s nine months of silence were the refining fire he needed to go through to see his blessings clearly. To realize that he didn’t need to voice objections to God when God had made the path clear. To realize that his own son, and not Zechariah himself, was going to play a pivotal role in the story of God. To humbly see God’s work of redemption taking place in the midst of his own family.

We will come to the Table in a few minutes. And at this table we see Advent hope in tangible ways. A feast has been prepared. And not just for a few. Not just for those who can afford to pay for dinner. All are invited to this table and there is room enough for all. This meal has gone through the refiner’s fire of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. A tangible sign that God will provide and is providing.

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. 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 into the way of peace.

May it be so.

Amen.