

This Sermon was written by Gary Smith for the First Congregational Church

## Preparing for Christmas with Silence

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Luke 1:5-20

This morning's scripture informs us of a couple expecting a baby, old Zechariah and Elizabeth who had long given up hope of having a child. Now I grew up in a small church in Burley where everyone knew everything about everybody and when Gertrude got pregnant at age 50 after already having four daughters, well, everyone was talking about it. Some said it was an opportunity to try to have a boy. Others said it was an accident. At first Gertrude attempted to keep it a secret, then she began referring to the bulge as her tumor. I remember asking my mother if she had cancer and she laughed and informed me that Gertrude was having a baby.

Zechariah and Elizabeth wanted to avoid that kind of publicity and so they went into seclusion. But I'm getting ahead of the story. This is an advent story that is often overlooked. It is the story of the birth of John the Baptist who was to prepare the way for Jesus. This birth could not have happened to a more deserving couple. They had served the Lord their whole lives, born of the tribe whose responsibility it was to minister in the temple. They were upright, blameless, saintly people. Zechariah served the temple his whole life so that now he was at the pinnacle of priestly service. He was chosen to light the candles and burn the incense in the holy place of the temple, off limits to everyone else. Then he was to come out and lead the prayer service. Well, he was in the Holy of Holies for what seemed like an eternity and everyone gathered there for prayer was worried that something had happened. And what would they do because only Zechariah was to enter the holy place.

Meanwhile an angel appeared to him and announced the good news that his wife would have a child. But he did not believe the messenger so the angel gave him a sign as evidence that this was really going to transpire, "You will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born." Zechariah returned to the people but he couldn't speak. He gestured and they realize that he has seen a vision. Zachariah got the silent treatment backwards for he was unable to speak for nine months. I can't think of anything worse for an extrovert like myself than to be unable to talk. That is punishment, but even worse is having the ones you love give you the silent treatment. Remember the old adage, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me?" We were taught it but it isn't true, our feelings do get hurt. I read about the origin of this saying which dates back to 1872 and the second verse goes, "words may sting like anything but silence breaks the heart."

Not only in human relationships do we have hurts and feel abandoned but when our circumstances in life change and we sense God is silent, not hearing our prayers, not meeting our needs, it hurts and we feel alone. When we can't live our normal lives. When the job market is tight, when the car breaks down, when the kids need clothes, school supplies, and want things their friends have. We often feel the silence of God when confronting health issues, illness and the death of our loved ones. Sometimes like now, during this pandemic, we are called to experience quietness and solitude.

I confess that I have a problem with silence. The scriptures say, "There is a time to keep silent and a time to speak." Discerning the time to be quiet is difficult. I have to tell myself "don't do

something. Just sit there and listen, wait for God to speak to you." Advent is a time for quietness and meditation, a time to connect to God, experience wonder and awe and look with expectation for a brighter future.

Someone I know commented on why he goes to church. He said he goes to church for transcendence, to pass briefly from this life into the next. He said, "Just a moment of transcendence causes me to come out of church as a changed person." It is through moments of silence that we experience God's presence, God's love, God's grace. So much of what God is up to remains off our radar screens but by accepting it by faith is to acknowledge that God is greater than our minds and understanding. It was in the temple that Zechariah encountered God's message. He was not the only person using this silent time for meditating. Mary had been told by an angel that she was going to bear God's Son. The scripture says that she pondered this in her heart.

I ask that you "Ponder" this Christmas. The word actually comes from the Latin word "ponderare", which means "to weigh." We get our word "pound" from it. Pondering, weighing things, that was what Mary was doing, turning things over in her mind, feeling them in her heart. We just don't ponder very much. We're so busy with everything, with work and family. So often I find that I am so busy that I take no time to ponder. It is so easy to suffocate the Holy under all the busyness and programming of Christmas.

But Mary took time to ponder. She was seeing life from God's perspective, Israel's long wait for God to act, the visit of the angel, the circumstances of her life, her relationship to Joseph, the birth of a baby, the redemption of the world. Can't you just visualize what her mind was like, racing with a thousand thoughts but knowing that all of life is in God's hands, then finding meaning and purpose that pondering in silence brings.

The Bible informs us, even when we are feeling the silence of the divine, that God is still at work quietly going about preparing the world for his reign. An old couple expecting, a routine church service has it interrupted by a heavenly vision. God can use simple, faithful people for a complex powerful event. God uses all people willing to serve for his purpose. The message for us is to believe God's messengers. Have faith that God's plan will transpire in spite of age, status or circumstance. Luke's purpose of including this story in his gospel is to raise the expectation of what will come.

Back in Burley, Idaho, Gertrude had a healthy baby girl, named her Amy and the whole church took interest in her, taught her, counseled her and when she matured the church helped to send her to a Christian college. She married and served the Lord as the spouse of a minister.

When Elizabeth gave birth, they took the infant to be dedicated. When the priest asked the name of the child, he was surprised that the boy would not be named Zachariah Jr. Elizabeth said his name is John. So the priest turned to Zechariah who wrote on a tablet, "His name is John." Immediately Zachariah was able to speak and his silence was broken with words of praise.

May God bless you and keep you safe during these trying times.