

Sermon: What do you say?

Year C, Reign of Christ

[Jeremiah 23:1-6](#); [Luke 1:68-79](#); [Colossians 1:11-20](#); [Luke 23:33-43](#)

Offered November 24, 2019 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

So let's say you're Zechariah. You're of a certain age, well past the point when you have to worry about day care, soccer practice or paying for college. You and your wife Elizabeth wanted kids, but they never came. You've risen up in the hierarchy of the priests at the Temple in Jerusalem, so that you are one of the very few who are allowed to go into the Holy of Holies. You're on duty, they draw lots, and you get to go in and light incense on the high altar. And suddenly you're not alone. An angel has shown up and tells you not to be afraid (like that ever works) and then tells you that your wife is going to have a baby. The baby's got a special role to play because he's going to help the people of Israel get their hearts right with God. And by the way, his name is John.

Now, this strikes you as crazy talk. If nothing else, you and Elizabeth are way too old to be having kids. So you ask the angel, in essence, "Are you sure?" It's a reasonable question. And the angel gets all ruffled up. "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news." (Luke 1:19). It is never good when you irritate an angel. Because the next thing he says is, "But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." (Luke 1:20)

You come out of the sanctuary and everyone figures out that you can't speak because you had a vision. You go home that night and your wife, Elizabeth, tells you that the most amazing thing has happened. She's pregnant.

And for nine and half long months, you can't speak. Elizabeth's kinswoman Mary comes over and Mary's pregnant too. It's weird that Elizabeth is pregnant at her age, but if rumors are to be believed, there's something even stranger about Mary's pregnancy. For nine months, you take it all in. You take in everything that's going on around you.

The Romans are running Jerusalem. It's not the way the government is supposed to work. They're running Jerusalem through their puppet Herod. And isn't he a piece of work. He's not from one of the old families and he's pretty much in open warfare with the scribes and the priests.¹ He and the ruling council of religious leaders, the Sanhedrin, are barely on speaking terms.² He has an enormous building project going on, where he's building an artificial harbor on the coast since Israel has no deep water ports for Roman shipping.³ And just to prove how loyal he is to the emperor, not to his people or his country or his religion, but to the emperor of Rome, he's named the port after him.

The Romans are demanding taxes on top of what everyone was already paying. So fewer and fewer people are paying their temple tax. Which means it's harder and harder to do your job and take care of all the things you need to take care of at the Temple. More and more of the young

¹ Raymond E. Brown, S.S, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*. (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1979): 188.

² Brown, 188.

³ Brown, 172.

people are learning Greek and, heaven preserve us, Latin. Fewer and fewer of them are studying to be priests and scribes. Fewer and fewer of them know the stories and traditions of their people.

This is the world that Zechariah is looking out on as the baby grows under Elizabeth's heart.

Can we put ourselves in Zechariah's shoes? A government struggling to function, a tax structure changing the way people behave. Religious institutions becoming less central to the community's life. The young people drifting away. Money being tight as the religious institutions are trying to offer the same services on less money. Everything seeming like it's been turned upside down and we have to be so careful about what to say to whom that it's like we've all been struck mute too. So yeah, maybe we can't know exactly what it's like in Zechariah's shoes. But it's not completely alien to us. There's a whole bunch we recognize.

So the baby is born, nice and healthy, and Elizabeth is fine too, thank God. Eight days after he's born, you take him and Elizabeth to the Temple, where your colleagues are going to give you the full treatment. They fuss over the baby, asking about little Zechariah. You still can't speak and Elizabeth says, "No, he is to be called John." (Luke 1:60) Now that's just wrong. First born baby boys are supposed to be named after their fathers. No one in your family is named John. You're a senior priest, you are a traditional guy, someone who knows right from wrong, so they bring you something to write on and you, Zechariah, you write ... "his name is John." (Luke 1:63). Because you are a traditional guy, and there is nothing more traditional than doing what an angel tells you to do.

After 40 weeks of not being able to say anything. After 40 weeks of watching what was going on the world and not being able to blow off steam. After 40 weeks of having to do a pantomime to say "we need more oil for the sanctuary lamps" or "it looks like rain; you better get the washing in off the line." After 40 weeks of not being able to blow off steam or point out that the new neighbor's new puppy does look a bit like Herod himself. After 40 weeks, from now until early September, just after the Republican National Convention, and how far away does that seem? After 40 weeks you suddenly find you can speak and what do you say?

Well, you're a traditional guy. And there was Sarah who was barren until God stepped in an Isaac showed up. There was Hannah and her Samuel who grew up to lead Israel from the reign of judges to the monarchy and who anointed King David himself. There was Manoah's wife and her Samson, who protected Israel until he was betrayed and even then he destroyed those who sought to harm Israel. And the angel Gabriel did say, "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." (Luke 1:16-17)

You're a traditional guy. And God said through the prophet Jeremiah, "Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." (Jeremiah 23:3-5)

You are a traditional guy. And it has been 40 weeks. You've had some time to think. If ever we needed shepherds to bring us back together it is now, given how far apart we've been driven. If ever we needed to remember that God is with us, it is now, given how much everything seems to be falling apart. If ever we needed to catch a glimpse of something true and right and good, it is now, given what an unholy mess everything seems to be at the moment, when we're planning our Thanksgiving table conversation more carefully than we're planning the menu.

You're a traditional guy and after 40 weeks of thinking, what do you say? You say it's time to remember the long game.⁴ You say that for you, and for this tiny creature you're holding in your arms, what makes life worth living is what has been true since the days of Abraham.⁵ You say that in all the mess of today, we have forgotten God's promise, but God has not.⁶ God has not and will not and God is acting, here, today, through these people here today. You say that John's story, your story, all of our stories only make sense when we engage with and are engaged by God's story, the divine drama of the salvation of the world.⁷ You say that when God shows up in this world, God shows up through people. God shows up through regular people like Zechariah and Elizabeth and little baby John and people's lives are interrupted, misery and lack are taken away and the people are restored and sustained.⁸ You say that the way the world is and is headed, no one can feel like the promises of God have been fulfilled. But that's all a mistake. God is trustworthy. God will fulfill all God's promises and more. Your baby son has been given the job of helping the people repent so they might see the coming light, the breaking dawn.⁹

It's been 40 weeks and you say all that. Because in your silence, you realize that in the silence of centuries, God has done the preparatory work for this world.¹⁰ In the silence of the last 40 weeks, God has done the preparatory work in you.¹¹ God saved you from your own unbelief¹² that God could reach into this world and change things. So you join the prophets and speak the truth and move forward. You join the shepherds and help gather God's flock back together. Because as you see it, God has already visited and redeemed God's people. God has planted in

⁴ Walter Russell Bowie, "The Gospel According to St. Luke: Exposition Chs. 1-6," in vol. 8 of *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1952): 45.

⁵ Bowie, 46.

⁶ J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "Second Sunday of Advent: Luke 1:68-79" in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C*, ed. Charles B. Cousar et al. [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994], 14.

⁷ McCann, 14.

⁸ Yolanda Norton, "Commentary on Alternate Psalm: Luke 1:68-79", Working Preacher "Lectionary Commentaries for November 24, 2019, Christ the King", https://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=1122&print_type=comm&is_spanish=0 (accessed 19 November 2019)

⁹ Adam Hearlson, "Commentary on Psalm: Luke 1:68-79", Working Preacher "Lectionary Commentaries for December 9, 2018, Second Sunday of Advent", http://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=1063&print_type=comm&is_spanish=0 (accessed 2 July 2019)

¹⁰ Robin Gallagher Branch, "Second Sunday of Advent, Exegetical Perspective, Luke 1:68-79" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 37.

¹¹ Branch, 37.

¹² Branch, 37.

our life a spiritual quality and given us a spiritual commission that nothing outside us can destroy.¹³

How do I know that's what you'd say if you were in Zechariah's shoes? Because that's what you've said with your pledges and your raffle baskets and your chili and soups. That's what you've said as you worked on the window replacement project and getting the electric bill slashed to ribbons. That's what you've said as you got the sanctuary ready for Advent and sung about where all the flowers have gone. That's what you've said with the wreath for SHARE families. That's what you've said as you've begun laying the ground for our work on Open and Affirming. That's what you've said at every coffee house, every take home meal, every spaghetti supper, every breakfast buffet. That's what you've said every time someone got really sick or needed a card in the mail. That's what you've said every Sunday you've shown up and greeted each other with the right hand of fellowship and made sure there were as many crayons as possible to spill on the floor and then pick up.

That's how I know what you'd say in Zechariah's shoes. Because you're determined to prove to yourselves and the world that Christ *is* King, that playing God's long game is the only game worth playing. Because through word and gesture through this Stewardship campaign and beyond, you've said, as Zechariah said, *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.* (Luke 1:79)

Well said my brothers and sisters in Christ, well said.

¹³ Bowie, 46.