

Advent 2, Luke 1:68-79, St. David's Episcopal Church (Elizabeth Felicetti)

It's Advent, the season many of us consider the most wonderful time of the year. I was not with you last Sunday when Advent and the new church year began, so you had Morning Prayer, complete with canticles. Canticles often cause a little drama here at St. David's when we have Morning Prayer. This time, Bonnie and I decided to just let you say those upsetting canticles instead of sing them, and I'm grateful to report that I have not received any complaining emails about the canticles since my return, as I normally do when we celebrate Morning Prayer instead of Eucharist.

I'm not sure why canticles are upsetting to many in our congregation. Perhaps it's just unfamiliarity. Generally, canticles are biblical texts set to music, and since I grew up Episcopalian, in the days before it was normative to celebrate the Eucharist weekly, I'm used to sort of warbling biblical chants. I'm glad and grateful that we have another canticle this morning while I'm here, this time related to John the Baptist. We get two Sundays of John the Baptist (or JBap as some of his admirers call him) in Advent. Next Sunday, we get the brood of vipers passage along with the rose-colored candle. This Sunday in the Gospel, we don't hear from John himself, rather hearing *about* him. So this Sunday we're setting the stage for the hard-core prophet who will show up next week to shout at us. Just like JBap prepares us for Jesus, perhaps this week's readings prepare us for next Sunday's JBap.

The canticle we get today is the canticle or song of Zechariah, John's father, who was a priest. Before the angel Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary in Luke's Gospel, Gabriel first went to Zechariah when he was offering incense inside the Lord's sanctuary. Like with Mary, Gabriel said "Don't be afraid," and told Zechariah that even though he and his wife Elizabeth were very old, they were going to have a child, and that he would be named John. John was going to be a holy man who would prepare people for the Lord.

Zechariah said in response to all this, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years."

Gabriel did not care for Zechariah's response so told him that since he didn't believe this good news, Zechariah was going to be struck silent. So Zechariah could not speak until his son was eight days old and needed a name, and after agreeing with Elizabeth that the baby's name would be John, as Gabriel had directed, Zechariah spoke this canticle: his first words in months and months and months.

Have you ever stopped speaking for a time? I've had laryngitis twice, both time during Advent, and both times the cure was not talking, which is difficult for a preacher. Maybe getting laryngitis twice *during Advent* should say something to me about this season of preparation. Maybe some silence is appropriate.

What do you think life was like for Zechariah when he couldn't speak?

The first time I woke up and couldn't speak I thought only about preaching and celebrating, and when the doctor told me that if I wanted to preach the following Sunday I couldn't speak at all for five days, *not even whispering*, I couldn't fathom how that would work. Since this was before

Instacart, I wore a sign around my neck that said “LARYNGITIS” so that grocery store clerks would understand when I didn’t say anything back to them. I couldn’t talk on the phone and remember one woman from my former church—not any of you or anyone you know-- calling our house. Gary explained the situation and offered to “translate” what she wanted to say to me, and was surprised by the things that people say to their priest.

That quiet time ended up being a gift, like a retreat during a busy time. I hate talking on the phone, so once I stopped (silently) laughing at Gary’s wide eyes listening to my parishioner, I enjoyed not being able to talk. I could still listen. And when we truly listen, not just wait until it’s our turn to speak, we hear much better.

Zechariah couldn’t hear Gabriel well enough because he was anxious and disbelieving. By the time months had passed, and he couldn’t interrupt, Zechariah had fully absorbed what Gabriel had said. He named his child John, and, we can assume, followed all of the guidance Gabriel had laid out.

I don’t believe that Zechariah was composing this canticle when he couldn’t talk. Scripture says he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and I think that’s how it came out. He’d been given the gift of silence, and could hear the Spirit, so the Spirit poured out of him as soon as he could speak again.

Do you have any silence in your life this Advent? Sometimes we fill all possible spaces with noise. Even though I don’t like talking on the phone, I listen to podcasts on my phone when I’m walking in the morning, when I could be listening to birds. I listen to four different news podcasts because otherwise I might miss something. But then I tune them out and my mind wanders.

So much noise gets through. Do I have space for God? Do you?

This season of expectation and hope and light in the darkness is a time filled with people trying to sell us things and frantic festivities and Christmas music during Advent and various cultural expressions of a religious holy day that would be unrecognizable to our friend John the Baptist.

Dana Blackman, our formation director, has created an Advent station for us, with questions and tags and pens we can use to respond to the questions and hang our answers on a small tree. We can listen for God through the questions, our reflection, and the responses of others.

Can you carve out some time this season for silence? Some time to walk the labyrinth, reflect on our Advent tree, maybe light a candle and listen for angels whispering the words of God in your ear?