



Once when [Zechariah] was serving as priest in his division's turn before God, the angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right of the altar of incense. Zechariah was troubled by what he saw, and fear came upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John. Then Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel said to him in reply, "I am Gabriel, who stand before God. I was sent to speak to you and to announce to you this good news. But now you will be speechless and unable to talk until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at their proper time."

LUKE 1:8, 11-13, 18-20

THE VISITATION AND ZECHARIAH

As you gaze upon the image of Zechariah and the visitation of Mary and Elizabeth, what captures your attention? Where do your eyes linger? Is it the figure of the two women — one older and one younger — both with unexpected but welcome pregnancies? Or is it the watchful face of Zechariah peering out the window? Can you place yourself there with them? Imagine the excited and nervous exclamations between Mary and Elizabeth and the contrast of Zechariah's silence.

Zechariah is a small but meaningful figure in the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. Like Mary, he received a visit from an angel telling him that he would have a son. But unlike Mary, Zechariah's questions are met with divine frustration. He is punished with silence for second-guessing God's plan. For the duration of his wife Elizabeth's pregnancy, Zechariah is made mute, unable to speak. The father of John the Baptist, of God's "voice crying out in the desert," is silenced.

Silence can be both liberating and terrifying. Take a moment to attend to the noises around you now. Is it loud or quiet where you are? Are there natural or mechanical sounds? How loud are the thoughts in your head or the feelings that reside below the surface?

External silence is one thing, but internal quiet is another. In what ways do we sometimes crave noise, as a means of avoiding the thoughts or feelings that can rise up out of the silence? As a priest, Zechariah would have spent most of his days praying and teaching; he would've spent time

in the temple talking with his peers about scripture and working with worshippers. His voice might've been a constant companion; and his internal monologue, perhaps like our own, might have also been constant.

Do we live our lives that way today? Externally, television, radio and social media are always running like a ticker in the background. Our patients, residents and co-workers have needs to be met, as do our families and personal lives. Internally, we roll through our to-do lists, reflect on past conversations and plan future agendas. The noise and clamor are endless. It is no wonder that we can sometimes be like Zechariah. It is no wonder that when something sacred happens — when an angel of God shows up directly in front of us — we might miss it entirely. Are we too preoccupied with our own noise to receive the divine message?

Zechariah's silence is the silence of Advent. Like him, we are called to watch and wait for the fulfillment of God's promise. We are called to spend time in Advent listening for God's message of fulfilled hope and miraculous change. We are called to cast aside not only our doubts but also the limitations our disbelief puts on God. Instead, consider how the answers we seek might actually reside in silence. To what does the silence of Advent call you? How are we being called to trust in the good that has been promised?