

*The Gift of Silence*  
Luke 1:5-13, 18-20  
December 3, 2023  
Pastor Sarah Wiles

5 During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. 6 They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. 7 They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old. 8 One day Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. 9 Following the customs of priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense. 10 All the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering. 11 An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear. 13 The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John.

18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old." 19 The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. 20 Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen."

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Today is the first Sunday of Advent. If your house is anything like mine, the countdown to Christmas is on. I caved and bought Bluey Advent calendars this year. There's chocolate behind every door.

But Advent in the church is different. I have nothing against the Advent calendars with treats. I like chocolate. But Advent in the church is different.

It's about longing and desire—for peace, for change, for love. It's about making space in our lives and our hearts for something new to be born. It's not that different from the way a pregnant person's organs move into steadily smaller spaces to make room for the new life that's growing.

There are a lot of ways to make space for longing and desire. You're doing one right now by gathering with others for worship. This is a space you've created in your life to connect with God and community.

Luke's story of the birth of Jesus is also a story of opening up space, making room. Old Zechariah who knows the routine has something wild happen to him that he can't quite believe—that silences him.

This is usually interpreted as a punishment, a consequence for doubting. But when I read it this week, honestly, it doesn't sound like a punishment at all. It sounds like a break, a gift.

Notice, it's not that Zechariah is now surrounded by silence. It's just that he's fallen silent. All he can do is listen. One of the things that fascinates me here is that Zechariah isn't just any old guy. He is trained and practiced in connecting with the Divine. He has the pedigree and the education and degrees. He could teach the class on how to burn the incense and say the prayers.

But he's silenced. Once he has no other choice but to listen, *then* he's transformed. It's not about his knowledge and skill. Those are fine, good, but they aren't the essential. The falling silent is. The listening.

I took one course on teaching while I was in seminary. I wish I'd taken more. I got a lot out of the one, though. We would take turns teaching the class in different ways. One week the task was to teach a class on a complex topic while saying as little as possible. Could you teach a class without saying a word? Now, that was a challenge. My small group assigned pre-work to our classmates to prime a conversation. But once we got in the room it went against my every instinct not to tell them all the things I thought I knew that I thought they didn't. Falling silent is hard.

Later in life I had a good friend who is a virology professor and who'd also done a lot of research about science education. What works? What doesn't? When she described her teaching, about half of it was like that. She would stop talking, fall silent. She'd just listen—and that's when the learning really happened, both for her students and herself.

You know, I've wondered if the real gift for Zechariah was that he finally had to listen to his spouse. Which I'm guessing it was a gift for Elizabeth, too—both the silence and the experience of being listened to. Some of us who have been silenced not by God but by the world need to speak up more. And many of us need to speak less, fall silent, just listen.

Sometimes our best contribution to the world comes not from all the words or knowledge or truth we think we have, but from our willingness to receive, to be taught, be fed, be changed. Our willingness to fall silent and listen.

When we fall silent, then, at last, there's space for others, for Christ, for love, for something new to be born.

Let's hold the silence together for a minute. Listen.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023