

## **“Finding Our Tongue”**

Sermon by Emily Rose Proctor

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent – Dec. 20, 2015

First Presbyterian Church in Marianna, FL

### **Luke 1:57-80**

<sup>57</sup>Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. <sup>58</sup>Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

<sup>59</sup>On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father.

<sup>60</sup>But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.”

<sup>61</sup>They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.”

<sup>62</sup>Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him.

<sup>63</sup>He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed.

<sup>64</sup>Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.

<sup>65</sup>Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea.

<sup>66</sup>All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?”

For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

<sup>67</sup>Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: <sup>68</sup>“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

<sup>69</sup>He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, <sup>70</sup>as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets

from of old, <sup>71</sup>that we would be saved from our enemies  
and from the hand of all who hate us.

<sup>72</sup>Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant,

<sup>73</sup>the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us

<sup>74</sup>that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear,

<sup>75</sup>in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

<sup>76</sup>And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

<sup>77</sup>to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins. <sup>78</sup>By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

<sup>79</sup>to give light to those who sit in darkness  
and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

<sup>80</sup>The child grew and became strong in spirit,  
and he was in the wilderness  
until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be  
acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”<sup>1</sup>

Greetings. I am Zechariah, Elizabeth’s husband—I believe she spoke to  
you earlier, so you already know some of our story. Of course, she  
spoke to you in the middle of her pregnancy, when I was incapable of  
speech and had been for some months. She spoke the truth, I’m sure,  
but not the whole truth. Though, try as we might, is it ever the whole  
truth? But there I go again, with my skeptic’s heart. They say an  
alcoholic is always an alcoholic, even after years of abstinence. Perhaps  
the same is true of cynics.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 19:14 (NRSV).

I didn't start out as a cynic, of course. People rarely do. As you might guess from my wife's testimony, my cynicism was born of decades of disappointment. Years of fruitless sacrifices and unanswered prayers. I began the priesthood feeling specially chosen by God, feeling blessed and hopeful about the future. By the time my lot was chosen to offer incense in the inner sanctuary—usually a once in a lifetime occurrence, I was just going through the motions.

Maybe you know what that feels like. You go to the temple, year after year, you hear the scriptures, you say the prayers—maybe you even have them memorized—but they are just words. Sometimes you just want to shout out, “Blah, blah, blah...” and leave. But I am a priest in a family of priests, so I always did my duty and held my peace, my heart dry as the Negev in a summer drought.

I'll admit that I was somewhat excited as I entered the inner sanctuary, but it wasn't because I expected a messenger of the Lord to appear to me. I was mostly thinking about not dropping the dish of incense or tripping on my robe—going over in my mind the blessing we were to say when we all came back out—you know the one, “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” Only I never got to say it. Try as I might, no intelligible sound would come from my mouth.

I can't really give you as much detail about my encounter with Gabriel as you might like. I remember the place being filled with light and myself being terrified out of my mind—I probably did drop the incense, come to think of it. I heard a voice telling me not to be afraid, that my prayers had been heard and that my wife was going to have a son named John. Then something about great joy and our son being like a Nazirite and like Elijah.

In all honesty, I got hung up on the having a son part. That snapped me right out of my terror. At the mention of a son, I could feel long-suppressed bitterness rising up inside me. I forgot where I was or who I might be talking to. I remember thinking something like, “Oh now we’re going to have a baby? Now that our backs are killing us, and we can barely remember what we did yesterday, much less last week? I must be hallucinating.”

I can’t remember exactly what I said, but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t that different from what Abraham said when the Lord predicted children for him and Sarah. I just wanted some kind of further reassurance or proof that I wasn’t just imagining all this.

But it was obviously not the answer the voice was expecting—not that I knew in the moment that I was talking to the same Gabriel who had appeared to the prophet Daniel. But boy, did I sure find out quick!

I guess in a way, I got exactly what I asked for. Nearly a year of silence to think over what had happened, what the angel said, and how I responded. At first, I thought it was an odd punishment for someone like me who wasn’t overly talkative to begin with.

In fact, I tended to be rather impatient with unnecessary speech. I hate to admit it, but I had developed a rather a bad habit of cutting my wife off mid-sentence or even shushing her if she started going on and on about something I considered unimportant.

If you’d asked me beforehand how I would feel about a year of silence, I’d have said, “Bring it on.” It seemed to me that there just wasn’t that much worth talking about. Most of what passes for speech these days is just idle chatter, destructive gossip, or just a recitation of what we think is expected of us.

But, of course, that was before. Before I had something worth talking about. Something I needed to talk about. To talk through with Elizabeth. I had finally experienced something extraordinary—a real God-moment, if you will, and I could say nothing. For the first time, I found myself longing to speak. And to be spoken to.

It's interesting how people start to treat you differently when they see you as having some sort of disability. I couldn't speak, but people began to treat me as though I couldn't hear either. They would shout at me or make big gestures with their hands, until Elizabeth reminded them that it was only my voice that was gone—not my hearing or my mind.

But even Elizabeth, my chatty wife, began to speak to me less and less, though I wouldn't say we stopped communicating. In fact, we probably communicated more and better than ever—we just learned to do it with our bodies more than our words. Still, after a while, I found myself longing for the sound of her voice. Its particular lilt and inflections as she told a story.

We both went more inside of ourselves for a while. And I also went to the scriptures. It was as if the silence had made me ravenous for words, and for holy words in particular. Every chance I could get to listen to people read or talk about the holy scrolls, I took it. I spent more time than ever in the synagogues. I found my way into the homes of scribes and Pharisees, synagogue officers, and those who hosted itinerant scholars and preachers.

I heard familiar verses and prayers with new ears. I listened with uncharacteristic intensity to the promises made to Abraham and David, to the prophets, especially Isaiah. The psalms became my daily bread. Passages that had never held much significance to me now burned in my heart.

I listened hard for any references to the voice of the Lord, and in particular to the angel Gabriel, who appeared to Daniel, and to Elijah, whom Malachi says will come again before that great and terrible day of the Lord to turn our hearts to one another.<sup>2</sup> And did you know that Daniel too was speechless after one of his visions? He also was told that his prayers had been heard. He also was told not to be afraid.

One of Daniel's visions occurred in the midst of him praying for Jerusalem and the desecrated Temple. "We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness," he prayed, "but on the ground of your great mercies." I couldn't help thinking about the name we were to give our son, John, which means, "The Lord is gracious."

Maybe I'd been too focused first on earning God's favor—or even deserving it—and then on the judgment I perceived in the form of divine silence and unanswered prayers. Maybe I had lost sight of God's mercy. Not only for us, but for our people too.

There was another line in Daniel's prayer—"Let your face shine on your desolated sanctuary," he says, and that image of light shining in the darkness has stuck with me. It's in Isaiah too: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined."<sup>3</sup>

It's true that the inner sanctuary was dark, when Gabriel's light filled it to the point of blinding, but there was a darkness in my own heart too. Cynicism, disappointment, depression, apathy—whatever you want to call it—I didn't really see it for what it was until Elizabeth conceived. But it's more than that too—there has been a greater darkness blanketing our people.

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<sup>2</sup> See Daniel 8-12.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 9:2 (NRSV).

The darkness of Roman occupation and control, from the oppressive taxes to the small indignities forced on us by the soldiers. We have endured our own kind of silence from the Lord for a long time now, and been silenced by an Empire, who would call itself the harbinger of peace.

I realized this when I heard this passage from Isaiah 59: “The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace.

Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead. We all growl like bears; like doves we moan mournfully. We wait for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us.”<sup>4</sup> If that is not the cry of my people, I don’t know what is.

But Jeremiah says that the covenant with David and his descendants is as sure as the dawn.<sup>5</sup> And the peace, the Shalom promised to the City of Peace, Jeru-shalem, is one in which justice is not sacrificed. Isaiah says, “For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup>His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.”<sup>6</sup>

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4 Isaiah 59:9-11 (NRSV).

5 Jeremiah 33:19-26 (NRSV).

6 Isaiah 9:5-7.

I'm sorry if I sound a bit like a walking Bible. As I said, for almost a year—this has been my food and drink. The Word of the Lord has become both a mirror for me and a lamp.

Psalm 106 convicted me in particular—the story of how over and over we—God's people—have lost faith in the Almighty, in spite of his deeds of power. Over and over, God has heard our cries and forgiven our ingratitude, our complaints, our wandering—and yet we still think of him as more being more like Caesar—either ignoring us, draining us dry, or crushing us at the slightest provocation—yet so often Scripture speaks of him like a parent who could never be deaf to his children's cries.

It's funny to say, but in many ways, I feel like Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel. Our son too was an answer to years of prayer. He too was to be like a Nazirite, a prophet. And I found Hannah's song echoing in my heart—the exuberance of it, the confidence in the Lord's justice—not just for herself, but for the poor, in his promised deliverance of his people from our enemies. My own song of praise and prophecy began growing deep inside of me, even as our son began growing in my wife Elizabeth.

I didn't plan it out exactly, but I knew that when I finally found my tongue, on it would be a love song of sorts. A love song to God, in gratitude for all he has done for us, and is doing, and will do, and a love song for my son—something to strengthen and guide him. And it was.

I don't know what your relationship is or has been to silence and speech, to words in general or to God's Word in particular. But I am encouraged by your presence here in this community of worship.

The words spoken here—stories of our ancestors and of God, songs of lament and praise, prophecies and wisdom—if you listen to them often enough, if you study them, if you speak and sing them, they are bound to shape the way you perceive the world and what you say to it in return.

It's like it says in Psalm 19—another one of my favorites. All creation gives testimony to the glory of God, but we need God's Word as it comes to us in scripture to help us hear and understand it, and be able to share it with others.

If you continue to let the words and worship of this faith community shape you, I think that you too will find, over time, that the words that matter most are really just variations on one word, and that is Love. Not infatuation or tribal loyalty, but an ever-widening love that ripples out from the center of all things. An ever-deepening love that is more poetry than prose. A resurrecting love that will carry us to God like a song we know by heart.

Maybe this is the Good News: that love is the Mother-tongue of us all.