

Have you ever experienced the deep silence of God? This is a time of hope, joy, & promises, and yet, many struggle this time of year. What does it mean to hope in God when we are in the midst of facing life's difficulties, when life doesn't turn out the way we desire? We light Advent candles representing hope in the midst of disappointment, hopes that don't necessarily have an answer yet. Today, we look at Zechariah's story.

Zechariah is from the priestly tribe of Aaron. He belongs to one of 24 groups of priests. Dividing their duties, Priests officiated at Temple sacrifices two weeks out of the year. There were more than enough priests so their duties were distributed by lot. The most sought after duty was to enter the sanctuary to perform the most solemn part of the Temple's daily service alone before God, in the Holy Place, separated from the Holy of Holies only by a thin veil. Inside they burn incense on the golden altar, symbolizing the prayers of the people. They emerge speaking God's blessing upon the people.

No priest is permitted to perform this duty more than once in their life and many are never chosen. We can imagine Zechariah's joy when the lot falls to him. 15 minutes of glory.

But he didn't expect it to quite be the way it turned out, because angel visitations were rare. The angel Gabriel approaches saying, "*Zechariah your prayer has been heard.*" Now remember, he's an old man. He has prayed all kinds of things faithfully for years. Which prayer? It might be a prayer he is no longer praying. Too little, too late, he might be thinking.

When Zechariah realizes which prayer, he is confused. Zechariah finds it too hard to believe. Until that moment, he has naturally assumed that, in their old age (which was probably only 40 or 50), Elizabeth could not possibly bear a child? There's a bit of cynicism when Zechariah asks, "*But how can I be sure of this?*" His response indicates an unwillingness to accept a bigger reality.

And Zechariah is rewarded, for what we might regard as healthy skepticism, by being silenced. This action may have signified a new beginning that marks a deeper dialogue between Zechariah and God. Zechariah could have hardened his heart during this enforced silence. Instead, the birth of his son marks a spiritual rebirth for him. When speech is restored, Zechariah's "*tongue was loosed and he spoke blessing God.*" Prophesying about the vital work his son John would undertake.

*Praise be to the God of Israel, because God has come and redeemed us. God has enabled us to serve without fear in holiness. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go to prepare the way for the Lord, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.*

These were the first words that Zechariah spoke in 9 months. This is also the first public prophetic witness to Israel in more than 450 years of silence following Malachi, the last prophet in OT. During this great silence the nation falls into the hands of the Romans. Where was God?

Zechariah's praising God compels us to believe that perhaps he used those months of silence to develop a more intimate way of communicating with God. Perhaps during the imposed silence and

isolation and waiting, Zechariah could now search for a new connection with God. Could it be that this divinely enforced silence was actually a hidden gift from God? As with Zechariah, there may come a time when God will present us with a greater reality than what we have previously known. There are different ways that hope dies in our lives. After a period of years sometimes you find that you don't really expect things to change. You've stopped expecting God to work in your life. We are in a time that focuses in on hope, but we've got to admit that most of us come struggling with the fact that we have dead hopes in our lives. Where are those dead hopes?

Waiting teaches us to Trust in God: When we can't control things and when we can't predict the future, we begin to live in trust. Trust in God takes us beyond self-reliance into new depths of faith. Waiting opens us to vulnerability and fear, but it also opens us to strength and courage. Romans 8:26 – *"We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words."* The Quakers have a saying that I love - *"I will hold you in the light."*

This simple prayer, one of trust, delights in God's awesome wisdom, sits in contrast to the highly controlled wish list of desired outcomes that we may present to God. It is a prayer of surrender to the larger picture of God's love. Trust in God invites us to let go of our fears, to open our hearts in prayer, and to trust in the boundless care & love that God has for us. Waiting teaches us to embrace our own resilience and courage, to believe that others will reach out to help, and to know that God's love will always find us. Christina Baldwin writes: *"Life is a great unending opportunity to see things differently, to keep reframing disaster and discouragement, into faith and trust."*

Waiting teaches us compassion. Have you ever had the experience of waiting in the family lounge of the hospital ICU? If so, you know the feeling of desperation and intense anxiety. Of talking to a stranger sitting next to you and asking who their loved one is and what they are waiting for. That same stranger saying, *"I'm going to get something to eat. Do you want to come? Can I bring something back for you?"* Even with total strangers, sharing fears and insecurities while we wait offers a bridge of understanding. Waiting in uncertainty together creates compassion. And compassion reminds us that we are not alone. It teaches us to receive. It allows us to gather strength from others. And it offers us hope. The true gift of waiting is not isolation, but connection. Intense waiting opens the door to even more intense love and allows us to be seen. Waiting creates a unique bond among those who experience it together.

The good news we see in this passage is that God has not forgotten us either. It doesn't mean that we get everything we the way we want it. Even if our desires are pure, it doesn't mean that God will answer necessarily the way we want. There are answers that will come, but are delayed and there are others where God has to replace what we desire with something that is bigger and closer to God's heart. But the promise is that God hasn't forgotten.

In the Christian year, Advent marks the start of the year. It lays the foundation for everything else that is going to happen in the year. It's the start of our hopes. It is never too late for any of us to set our lives and hearts straight before God, as God never gives up on us. This is as true for the old as it is for the young. Zechariah probably believed he had seen everything there was to see for a man his age. Zechariah's example offers all of us hope. His enforced silence helped him set his heart right before God. Advent is a time to rekindle hopes, to trust God again because God isn't finished with us yet. The best is yet to come.