

Luke 1:5-20 – Don't be a dumb waiter

Zechariah's Story

Of the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), Mark begins his story with the ministry of John the Baptist, Matthew begins with the birth of Jesus but Luke wants to take us back still further – to where this new movement of God really begins (see 1:3), to the birth of John the Baptist.

For some 400 long years, God had been silent – or so it seemed to his people. Since the last of the Old Testament prophets there was just the echo of his voice. God's people were longing for the day when God would act again: when he would speak afresh; when he would do something new for the salvation of his people.

Imagine such waiting, listening, hoping ... year after year. "When O Lord? When will you come and help us? When will you fulfil the promises you have given us through the prophets? How long O Lord?"

But now, says Luke, after all those years of waiting, God is acting again; he is speaking again. He is raising up another prophet, like the prophets of old. Through him he will announce the new thing he is about to do.

And when God acts, he does so in unexpected ways, displaying his power.

God chooses to act through an elderly, godly childless couple – Zechariah the priest and his wife Elizabeth. They had been waiting and longing: they had longed for children, but God had not answered their prayer. Their hope for children was probably long dead – it had become the echo of a hope. But they still waited and longed for the day when God would again visit his people; when he would come to them; speak to them; save them.

On the day we have read about in Luke 1 Zechariah was ministering in the Temple. He had been chosen that day to offer incense on the altar in the sanctuary, before the curtain to the most holy place. Once everything had been prepared for him to offer the incense, the other priests left; he was he was alone in the sanctuary. The other priests and crowds of people waited in the court of the Temple for Zechariah to come out.

This was one of the most solemn experiences of his life: waiting on God; offering incense to God – symbolic of the prayers of his waiting, longing, praying people, longing for God to come and speak and act as he had done in days past.

And as Zechariah is offering incense an angel appeared standing beside the altar. God has heard! God has acted! God is about to speak! And Zechariah is terrified.

The angel's first words are "Do not be afraid". These paradoxical words are words that God has to say so often to his people – people longing for him to act, praying for him to act, but terrified when he does act. God speaks words of reassurance – he comes to us in grace not in wrath; his power is benevolent power.

"Your prayers have been heard", the angel says: Zechariah's prayers over the years for the longed-for child; the prayers of Zechariah and of all of God's people symbolised in the incense – "Have mercy, Lord. Come Lord!"

Zechariah and Elizabeth are to have a son. He will be called "John" – "The Lord has been gracious."

John will be filled with the Spirit from his birth, for God has come to be with him and in him and to act and speak through him. He will speak on God's behalf; he will be a prophet like those of days past. But he will differ from those prophets for he will proclaim that **now** God is about to act. By his ministry he will turn many back to the Lord – he will prepare the way for the coming Messiah: pointing people to him; preparing people to embrace him.

Zechariah simply cannot believe it. It's quite understandable in a way for they are now too old to have a child. How could such a thing happen?

"How can I be sure?", Zechariah asks. But the question is foolish – he can be sure because God has sent an angel to announce this to him. That should be assurance enough. God has spoken.

But because of Zechariah's unbelief he is struck speechless. He must be a dumb waiter for the promise of God to be fulfilled.

It is as if he has now become part of that long period of silence – waiting for God to speak and act.

Imagine him as he leaves the Temple. The crowds are gathered outside waiting for him, but he has no word for them. It is as if God has not spoken: they must continue to wait in the silence.

But Zechariah is now wondering and hoping – beginning now to believe that all that God had promised he is about to fulfil. God is about to act.

Our Story

And what about us? Advent is a period of waiting. In our readings and in our thoughts we are taken back to the days before Jesus was born. We are encouraged to stand with those who were longing for the coming of the Messiah – for the Christ; who were longing for God to speak and act.

Advent reminds us that we too are in a period of waiting; waiting and longing for the day when Jesus the Christ will come again.

But for us it is not a period of dumb waiting, of passive waiting, for God **has** spoken.

The Spirit who was upon John the Baptist from his birth rested also upon the Virgin Mary, that God might become incarnate in Jesus Christ. God **has** come among us, he **has** spoken, he **has** acted.

And in Jesus' death and resurrection he has acted for the salvation of the world – as we shall be reminded in a few moments as we break bread and take wine together. Christ has come. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Nor is he now silent – God still speaks and acts.

For the same Spirit that lived in John, moving him to speak of the Christ, was poured out by the risen Lord Jesus on the Day of Pentecost. That same Spirit is still at work in the world – at work in us **now**, and at work through us to bring people back to the Lord their God.

God calls us to believe, to speak and to act; not to be dumb waiters like Zechariah – struck dumb through unbelief – but to believe and to speak. He calls us to open our mouths in celebration as we look forward to the day of his coming, confident in the sure and certain hope that what God has promised he will do.

And he calls us to tell others of the wonderful things God has done for us and shall yet do for the world.

Don't be a dumb waiter.

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