



Advent 2 - December 5, 2010
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

It's About Time God Showed Up Luke 1:5-23

Welcome to the second Sunday of Advent, the season that anticipates the coming of Jesus. Last week we talked about the silence of God. After hundreds of years of speaking to his people through his prophets...suddenly, God went silent. Not for a day or a week or even a few decades. For 400 years! Well...this morning, after 400 years in hiding...God shows up. We turn now to the opening act of the Christmas story.

In the temple of Jerusalem, just outside the most sacred chamber—the Holy of Holies—stood an incense altar. Fragrant smoke curled upward to the ceiling as an act of worship 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It was a rare privilege to be assigned the responsibility of replacing that incense. The average priest might do it once in his lifetime...if he was lucky. Zechariah was old priest when, suddenly, one day, the lot fell to him. This was a big deal. But Zechariah had no idea how big a deal it would be...because God was about to break 400 years of silence.

And remember, Zechariah and Elizabeth were living in double silence. There was the silence they shared with all Jews who cried out to God for freedom...but received no answer. But God was also silent in a more personal way. How? They were barren! In a day when barrenness was viewed a God's curse, Zechariah and Elizabeth were childless. They longed to have a baby. For decades they prayed that God would give them one. And what did they have to show for it? Nothing. Silence. Double silence.

Zechariah's hands trembled as he lit the incense; he was so excited! Suddenly, an angel appeared right next to the altar. What did Gabriel say? The same thing every angel said who ever appeared to a human being. "Don't be afraid." And what did Zechariah do? The same thing every human being has done who ever saw an angel: he got terrified.

Gabriel calmed him down...and then spoke these wonderful words! "God has heard your prayers. You will have a son named John. He will be a joy and delight to you...and he will be great in the sight of the Lord!" What a gift! A miracle child given to this old, barren couple. **But we pretty** quickly discover that this is not primarily about God doing something nice for them. It is about is God saving His world, something only He can do. And he starts by doing something else only He can do: giving a baby to a couple that is so far past their prime, they can't even see prime in the rear view mirror.

Listen to the rest of what Gabriel says: "John will be dedicated to the Lord's work. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth! He will turn people back to the Lord. He will minister in the spirit and power of Elijah and turn the hearts of fathers to their children." Wait a second...does that sound familiar! It should? We heard this promise last week. God's last promise for 400 years.

⁵“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers... ”

So, after 400 years of silence, God keeps his word. To Zechariah. But why him? Why them? What did they do to make God speak again? The answer? Nothing! Nothing! They didn't make God do anything. No one makes God do anything! One of doctrines we hold dear is the **sovereignty of God**. It says this: "God is God. God can do whatever God chooses to do. Absolutely everything in the universe is under His control. If God wanted to bless a shriveled up old couple with a son who will trumpet the coming of the savior...well, he's God! He can do whatever he wants to. God speaks when he will speak. He is silent when he will be silent. And what shall we do before this sovereign God? We bow! We trust. We wait.

Galatians 4:4 says this: "But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son..." Whose time? God's! When God's time had fully come, out of His grace and for His purpose...only then did He speak His next words to this particular old Jewish priest.

But I don't think this was a case of cosmic eenie meenie minie mo. Listen to verse 6 again: ***"Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly."***

When God did decide to show up...when God did speak up...whom did he choose to speak to? People who were doing what he **had already told them to do**. Zechariah and Elizabeth were both righteous people. They observed all the Lord's commandments and regulations **blamelessly!** Does this mean that they were perfect? No. But it does mean that they were trying to live in faithfulness to what they already knew their Silent God wanted them to do.

This is an important principle for every one of us. If you are living in God-Silence right now...there's certainly nothing you can do to force him to speak. **But you raise the odds that God will say more to you if you take seriously what he has already said to you.** Let me put it another way: **Do you want God to speak into your life? Then do what you already know!**

The fact is God has already said a lot to us! How? Right here. That's why we call this the "Word of God." When we read the Bible, God speaks to his words to us; telling us what matters to Him. Now...if you aren't even **trying** to live in obedience to what God has already said to you...why should God waste his breath saying anything more? Do you want to hear from your Silent God? Do you want to be used by Him to make a difference in his world? Then start by **doing what you already know**.

God has already said that he wants his children to **meet together regularly to worship him**. If you show up for worship once every few weeks when it is convenient, why should you be surprised if you aren't growing in Christ? God has already said that he wants his children to live **in accountable relationships** with each other. If you ignore every invitation to be a part of a LifeGroup, why should you be surprised that you are lonely, have no meaningful Christian friends and your life is out of control? God has already said that he wants his children **to be generous givers**. If you are stingy with the Lord and won't obey his financial principles, why should you be surprised when your finances are a mess? God has already said that he wants his **children to forgive**. If you choose to hold on to your hard-earned bitterness, why should you be surprised that God is silent? God has already said that he wants his children to **love his world**. If you couldn't care less about Burma or Palestine or Guatemala, why should you be surprised that God is silent? God has already said that **sex** belongs within the covenant of marriage. If you choose to sleep with your girlfriend, live with your boyfriend or wallow in porn, why should you be surprised that God is silent?

Listen beloved, we don't live in obedience to earn God's love; he already loves us! That's God's amazing grace! But if you are frustrated because God doesn't seem to be speaking into your life, frustrated because God doesn't seem to be showing up in your life...but you aren't doing what you **already** know God wants you to do...**why should you be surprised that God won't waste his breath on you anymore?**

When God's time was right, God chose to break his silence by speaking into the lives of two people who were living faithfully before him. And when God broke the silence, **wow** did he break the silence! **It was a two-fer** for Zechariah. The Messiah **was** coming to save the world, and this old couple's miracle baby would become his **front man**; the new Elijah! It doesn't get much more spectacular than that, does it? A visit from an angel. An announcement that God is going to answer your prayers. An invitation to be a part of the greatest act of salvation in history. **Wow! When God breaks his silence, he really breaks his silence, doesn't he?**

So...how did Zechariah do with that news? Not so well! Horribly, in fact. When Gabriel appeared and said, "I speak for God. I'm here to break the silence; to do what I've been planning all along-save my world. And by the way, I will **also** give you the longings of **your** heart. What do you say to that, Zechariah...." Zechariah said, "**I can't believe you!**" What? God finally speaks! God finally answers their prayers...and Zechariah says, "Nahhh....I don't buy it!"

Zechariah **could** have walked out of that temple declaring, "The Lord has spoken again! The Lord has broken his silence. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Instead, Zechariah walks out of that temple saying, "MMMMmmmmmm" He could have been the first mouthpiece of God in 400 years! Instead, he extended God's silence for nine more months.

So here's another question this story poses to us: when God does speak to you...either through the **Bible** or through your **LifeGroup** or through a friend or a through a series of **circumstances** in your life or through an **inner prompting** that continues to nag at you or through a **dream**...when God does speak...**will you be ready?** Ready to say, "Ahhh...I've been waiting for you. I'm so ready! What are my orders?"

Here's the perfect image for the person who is living faithfully in God's silence. [*Pictures of a person in starting blocks on a track*] In the starting blocks. Feet in place, head down, listening intently, every muscle rippling, ready to burst out of the blocks the moment the gun goes off.

But too many of us are more like this: (shoot-and wait) You look like you are ready to hear from God. But when he speaks...**it catches you by surprise**. When God's call actually comes, you are amazed! You can't believe it. You weren't ready for it. And you miss the moment. Maybe not forever. God was irritated with Zechariah and struck him dumb to teach him a lesson. In the end, he got his tongue back and proclaimed the grace of God, but think of the nine months of missed opportunities **because, when God spoke, Zechariah was doing all of the right religious stuff...but wasn't really ready to meet God at all.**

Does that describe you this morning? This morning is a perfect chance to practice spiritual readiness. It is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. And we believe that when we share this meal, Jesus shows up. We call it the "Real Presence." Not like our Catholic friends believe. We don't think that the bread and juice are the actual body and blood of Christ. But this is more than just a memorial ceremony. We believe that in this moment...in this sacrament...God

is present in a very real and special way. So...if God has been silent to you lately....he's about to show up. Are you ready? On your marks....

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read** the passage out loud.

 - **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.

 - **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

 - **Pray together:** tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.

 - **Dig deeper**
1. This moment should have been the highlight of Zechariah's life and yet, he failed. Why?

 2. Can you think of a time when God spoke...you felt prompted to act...and you hesitated and perhaps, missed the opportunity?

 3. What can you do to be ready to move when God breaks His silence to you?