

“The Case of the Speechless Preacher”

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

Series: Welcome the Child Week 1. Gabriel, Zechariah and Elizabeth

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In the beginning, God spoke and there was light. In the beginning, God sang and Space stretched out like a splendid sable fabric. The metronome of Time began its rhythmic pulsing. The starry host joined the chorus. Planets commenced their graceful dance. And all the celestial beings took up the everlasting song started by the Three in One.

I was created near the beginning of that great masterpiece. We were the first to join the symphony of creation. We are called by many names: אֲרָמְלָא, ἄγγελος, angel. My name is גַּבְרִיאֵל or Gabriel in your tongue. It means, “God is my strength.” I am one of the archangels who gaze upon the face of God. I was chosen to play a small part in His mission to save your planet. Listen now and I will tell you what I witnessed – the Gospel according to Gabriel.

First, I must clear up some of your errors about us. You humans do not become angels when you die. We are completely different beings. Also, angels do not wear those silly glowing circles you call halos, we do not walk on clouds, and we do not have wings. (Sorry Clarence). The cherubim and seraphim are winged beings but they are a different class from us. The cherubim are not chubby winged babies but terrifying creatures who guard the entrance to the Garden of Eden and the throne of God.

We angels are the Lord’s messengers and warriors. We make up the heavenly host. You probably think the heavenly host greets you at the door of heaven, takes your coat and offers you hors d’oeuvres. “Try this angel food cake – it’s divine.” Bah! Nothing is farther from the truth. The heavenly host are the armies of God. We are thousands upon thousands of angels who sing for joy in the presence of our King. We continue the song God sang from the beginning.

Yet one among us sang a different song. He shattered the harmony of the cosmos. Refusing to serve the Holy One, he twists the song of creation. His plan is to destroy the universe by making it return to the dark nothingness from whence it came. And thus Lucifer, the angel of light, became darkness itself.

After the Holy One expelled him from the heavenly court, he searched the wide universe for a place to continue his corrupt schemes. Then he found one. In a lush and peaceful garden he discovered a couple willing to sing his rebellious tune. Somehow, he convinced these puny mortal creatures they could be equal to the Holy One. Once the darkness gained a foothold, it spread a shadow across the surface of your planet. It poisoned your relationships causing you to turn on each other. Your hearts surrendered to the darkness. Your love for the Creator grew cold. Satan’s darkness blinded your race and deafened your ears so you no longer see us walk among you. You no longer hear the song of creation or feel the brush of God’s hand across your face. You live in a land of shadows. What you call pleasure, joy, love are poor copies of the deep feelings we know in the presence of our Lord. Time is now your enemy. With each passing year you become weaker until you return to the nothingness from which you came.

But the Holy One refused to let you slip away into that dark night. And so he summoned me and revealed His secret plan to save your world. He would be born among His chosen people, at the time He predicted in the royal house he selected. He sent me to make all the arrangements. Why me? Of all the heavenly host I know you best. I witnessed the fruit stains on the faces of Adam and Eve. I was by God's side when He called Abraham to leave his home. I held back Abraham's hand as he prepared to sacrifice his son. I wrestled all night with Jacob, hand delivered God's Law to Moses, protected the life of David and revealed God's vision to Daniel. And so now I descend this time to prepare the way for the Lord.

A journey to earth is never easy. Your planet is enemy territory. Slipping behind the front line is a dangerous mission for a being of Light in a land of shadows. I did have one problem with time and space on this journey. My Lord did not reveal to me the date and location of His arrival on earth. I searched the Scriptures for hints and discovered a vision revealed to the prophet Daniel. It reads,

Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One (Messiah), the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens' ... After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing." (Daniel 9:25-26).

Each 'seven' is a set of seven years. Thus it will be 532 earth years from the edict to rebuild Jerusalem until the Messiah is cut off. It was there in the Scriptures all along. I reread the chapter to see which of my fellow angels revealed this vision. Daniel wrote, "While I was still in prayer, Gabriel ... came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice" (Daniel 9:21).

Well I can't remember everything I've said in the last five centuries. By my calculations, the Word will become flesh in the days of that scoundrel Herod. Now I knew *when* to begin the preparations for the Lord's arrival. But the "*where*" still eluded me. The safest place for me to touch down on earth is the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. Lucifer cannot trespass on this holy ground. It is a safe house for us behind enemy lines. The Lord told me to look for a couple where the man is open and the woman is closed. Once I find them, the Lord commanded me to close the man and open the woman.

Passing from the Holy of Holies, through the curtain and into the larger portion of the Temple, I see the seven branched golden candelabra, the incense altar and the table of the bread of the Presence. At the same time, a human enters the front portal of the Temple. Dressed in a long white linen tunic with a golden cord wrapped about his waist, it is obvious he is a priest, since they alone are permitted to enter the Temple. Gray hair spills out from under his white linen hat and covers the lower portion of his face. His slow movements reveal stiffness in his joints. I notice one more unmistakable quality: the Light burns within him. In the realm of mortals, I have seen few who radiate such holiness. And yet he is troubled...even bitter. He, of course, cannot see me as he dutifully cleans the ashes from the incense altar and prepares to light a fresh offering.

Looking back through time, I review the life of this faithful servant. His name is Zechariah which means "The Lord remembers." He feels the Lord has forgotten him and his

wife. He is a descendent of Aaron, Moses' brother, and a member of the priestly division of Abijah. Twice a year, he rides up to Jerusalem with his fellow priests to serve in the Temple for a week. His wife Elizabeth, is also a descendant of Aaron. Forty years before their parents rejoiced at the wedding of this a holy couple. God's commandments are the foundation of their marriage. The Lord will surely bless this pious household with children. In fact, a cradle is among Elizabeth's dowry.

Elizabeth and Zechariah celebrate the birth of each child in the village. As the local priest, he gladly performs the ritual of circumcision on each little boy and blesses each girl. But for the first ten years of their marriage, the cradle in the corner remains empty. They agree to pray for a child. Surely the Lord will hear the request of this faithful couple. Another decade passes. Now they hold the children of their friend's children. Women at the well reassure Elizabeth that her time will come soon. But as she carries her water jug home, those who remain behind wonder aloud why God does not bless them with a child. "What a shame!" "Perhaps they are not as holy as they appear." "It is a curse! God is punishing them." Zechariah and Elizabeth pray more fervently. They mark their thirtieth anniversary. Elizabeth avoids going to the well when the others are there. Zechariah assigns a younger priest to perform the rituals for children. And the cradle is full of assorted odds and ends. At times they exchange angry words, weep bitter tears and cry anguished prayers. Finally, Elizabeth's days for motherhood draw to a close. The prayers for a child stop, the cradle is given away. Together they learn to accept God's will.

Then it dawns on me. Elizabeth is closed. Her womb is closed. Here is the couple I seek. Here is a man who is open and a woman who is closed. My assignment is to open the woman, to give them a child and close the man.

Zechariah lights the incense. As the fire and smoky fragrance rise, I step to the right side of the altar and reveal myself. (I love a dramatic entrance.) Immediately his head jerks up, his eyes widen and his face turns as gray as his hair. "Do not be afraid, Zechariah;" I reassure him, "your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John." "A child?" he manages to mumble. "Yes!" I reply. "He will bring joy to you, to all the nation, and to the Lord of heaven. Strong wine and spirits must never touch his lips for he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth." "A child?" he repeats. "Yes! A child that will reunite parents and children, teach sinners to walk God's path, bring the people of Israel home to the Lord. Like the fiery prophet Elijah, he will prepare the people to meet their God. He will prepare the way of the Lord."

"A child?" "What's wrong with you mortal?" I chided. "Yes, a child. Did I not make myself clear?" "No," he says, "I heard you. But after all these years, how can I be sure of this? It's impossible!" I notice anger in his voice. "I am an old man and my wife is beyond motherhood. Why did the Lord wait until it is too late? This is a cruel joke or a bad dream."

A joke? A dream? When I hear this I decide to teach Zechariah a lesson in faith. Now I see what God means about closing the man. "Do you know who I am? I am no illusion. I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent by the Lord to speak to you and to tell you this good news. But from now on you will not be able to speak or tell this good news to anyone. You will be silent until all that I have said is fulfilled."

Zechariah tries to take it back but nothing comes out. Grasping his throat he tries to squeeze out a word in vain. When he knocks over some priestly utensils Zechariah discovers he cannot hear them clatter to the ground. The speechless preacher runs out of the Temple flailing his arms at the crowd. When he returns home, Elizabeth does not fully understand how or why her husband is silent. But she comforts him and loves him in a way that requires no words.

In the weeks that follow, Elizabeth becomes ill. She fears the end is drawing near. She can't bear to tell her husband about the nausea boiling inside her. She also can't bear to keep it in. Suddenly it occurs to Elizabeth that she, a senior citizen, has morning sickness. Zechariah isn't surprised. With hand motions he says maybe they should buy another cradle. But she still doubts. For the first five months she hides from everyone – afraid it might be true and afraid it might not. The speechless preacher and his pregnant wife care for each other in seclusion.

Then, when she can hide it no longer, Elizabeth reveals her secret. Everyone is talking about it. Everyone, that is, except Zechariah. On the day of the delivery, the old priest cannot hear his wife's cries of labor turn into the cry of a newborn. The midwife touches his shoulder and then places a tiny bundle in his arms. Tears stream down his wrinkled face. Oh how he wants to bless his son, to thank his wife. But he is still locked inside the prison of silence. His ears and voice are still closed. His lesson is not yet complete.

Eight days later, Zechariah proudly carries his son to the ritual of circumcision. Although he cannot hear or speak a word, he knows the ceremony by heart. He has always been the priest but never the father. Elizabeth beams with joy. But when the priest declares, "He shall be called Zechariah," she shouts, "No! His name is John." Commotion erupts. Zechariah begs to know the cause of the chaos. After some clumsy hand signs, he guesses their question. Asking for a tablet and stylus, Zechariah inscribes in bold letters, "His name is John."

Suddenly the noisy confusion floods into his ears. Clearing a voice idle for nine months, he manages to croak out a few sounds. Then the congregation is speechless as they listen to the proclamation of the formerly speechless preacher. The man who lost his voice gains a song. Why did I wait until then to loosen his tongue? It's all in the name of his son. "John" means "The Lord is gracious."

Even though he did all the right commandments, bitterness closed Zechariah's heart to God. During that nine months of silence he learned that:

God never gives up on you, even when you give up on Him
 God speaks to those who are silent enough to listen
 God comes looking for us in the dark and calls our name
 God takes away your disgrace and gives you His grace

It took nine months for John to be born.
 It took nine months of silence for Zechariah to be born again.

Hopefully mortals, it won't take you that long.