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Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:68-79

## OUR PART AND GOD'S PART

We are moving toward the celebration of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. But it is not just an occasion to celebrate what happened long ago. This season of Advent is a time when we can begin to figure out what is our part and what is God's part, not just in an old story of God's work of redemption, but in our current stories. We begin with trying to be aware of what God has done so we can be filled with anticipation for what God might be doing even now.

Many of us know the story of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary, a young unmarried girl, to tell her of God's amazing plans for her to be the one to bring God in human flesh into this world. But we sometimes overlook an earlier visit from the angel Gabriel to an older man named Zechariah, also told by the Gospel of Luke. Zechariah was a priest who lived in the Judean hills with his wife, Elizabeth. They had not been able to have children and they were getting to be old enough where they had given up on such a possibility. They knew the scriptural story of Abraham and Sarah, who God had blessed with a child in their later years, but they grew to understand that story as having little direct relevance for their lives.

Luke tells us that Zechariah had been a particular priest chosen to go into a place of worship all by himself to offer prayers to God. As he does so, he is shocked by a visit from an angel, who tells him that he and Elizabeth will indeed have a child who they are to name John. Their son would have a special calling on his life to enable others to be ready to receive God's coming in a new way. Zechariah is understandably incredulous about all of this and tells Gabriel as much. In response, the angel takes away Zechariah's ability to speak for a period of time.

When Zechariah finishes his priestly duties, he goes home and Elizabeth does indeed get pregnant. After their child is born, they take the baby to be circumcised, which is when a Jewish child's name would be announced. Family and friends expect the child to be named after the father, Zechariah. But Elizabeth announces

they will be naming the child John, which is what Gabriel had told Zechariah to do. Zechariah, who still can't speak, indicates he is in support of the name, John, for the child. The name 'John' means 'graced by God,' and this child's entry into the world was an expression of God's grace. Indeed, John's primary message would also be an expression of God's grace. Amazingly, as Zechariah confirms what the angel had asked him to do, his ability to speak returns. At that point, as we heard in our reading, the one who had silently gone through a long time of waiting for God's promise to occur, beautifully expresses his recognition of God's faithfulness as well as his dreams about what God was going to do, using his son and God's son to direct people toward the divine gifts of mercy, light, and peace.

We who are parents know about holding dreams for our children. A friend of mine named Eileen tells of her experience as a young mother. She and her young son were out in the back yard. He was playing and she was sitting, reading a book, sipping some lemonade. After a while, the boy approached his mother, took a look at her cup, and asked her, "Momma, if I drink from your cup, would I catch your dreams?" Of course, he meant to ask whether he would catch her germs. But it got the mother to thinking, "O my beloved son, if only you could catch my great dreams for you just by drinking from my cup – dreams that your life would be one that would fulfill a great and joyful purpose." <sup>1</sup>

Zechariah, during his period of silent reflection, paid new attention to how God's redemptive work intersected with his own life. So, by God's grace, he was able to move out of his personal despair into a life filled with hope. His son, John's existence, would be a gift of grace for himself and Elizabeth. Yet, in addition, their son would partner with God's son to open the way for God's grace to bless so many more. For those of us who may feel like God's blessings have passed us by, this Advent season can be a time where we press the mute button on that which moves us toward despair in order for God's gift of hope to find new expression in our lives.

In Luke's story, we hear of others whose voices were muted, not by God, but by society. Elizabeth had been muted by those who looked down on her because of her previous inability to have children. Mary had been muted by the social norms that cast shame upon her pregnancy in an unwed status. The whole story is set in a

context where the powerless many are muted by the powerful few who have little interest in pursuing what is best for all.

But God's initiative brings transformative hope. Our role is to be aware of what God has done in the past as recognition of what God may be doing now, even within and through us. In a few minutes, as we receive the sacrament of communion, we will be invited to drink from our Lord's cup. It is an act of remembering an event from long ago. But as we do so, we can begin to catch God's dreams for us going forward – that we would live lives connected to God's great and joyful purpose for us, that we, like John before us, would partner with God's initiatives of grace and renewal. As we give expression to what God is doing within and through us, we find our voice to lift up our praise of God and to further proclaim the enlightening work God is doing. We find our purpose as part of the church of Jesus Christ, working in true partnership with God's redemptive work that is still going on today. As we do so, it is part of our call to enable those who have been muted by uncaring forces to receive opportunities to give voice to the dreams God has for them. As we do our part in the continuing holy drama, we can be confident that God's part will be carried out, raising up those who are called to serve in joyful partnership with God in order to be a blessing to others. We can be a part of God's dream for us and for the world! Thanks be to God. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a story told by Rev. Eileen Lindner at a Children's Defense Fund event at the Alex Haley farm in Clinton, Tennessee in 2001.

