

ADVENT I MIDWEEK
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ADVENT SILENCE

It was a tremendous honor, and Zechariah was well prepared. He knew what was expected and what needed to be done. All he had to do was sprinkle some incense in the right way and tend to some oil lamps. But he was doing this in the Temple, in the Holy Place, near the presence of Almighty God. Each morning and evening, a priest would enter, trim the lamps, and burn incense before the curtain that separated him from the Ark of the Covenant = from the presence of the Lord. It happened every day, but with 24 divisions of priests to share the duties, it was a rare honor. On this particular day Zechariah was chosen. He had to have been so excited to tell his wife about it when he got home. All was going as planned when all of a sudden God intervened. That's usually how God works in our lives unexpectedly. Through the smoke of incense, all of a sudden Zechariah saw an angel. He no doubt squinted his eyes to focus on what he was seeing. He was terrified, a normal reaction for any one of us. I wonder what was greater: Zechariah's astonishment at seeing an angel or the shock of hearing the angel Gabriel's words? 'Your wife will have a baby and he will be the forerunner of the Messiah'. Logically Zechariah's mind processed and questioned it: 'How can this be? We're too old. How can I be sure?' It's as if he was asking, 'give me a sign'. Poor Zechariah. Confronted with an unexpected blessing, he doubts. And yet he had already been given what he was seeking, the promised miracle WAS the sign! But Gabriel gave Zechariah what he was seeking: another sign. And Zechariah became mute. He couldn't speak when he came from that Holy Place. He couldn't speak when he got home. He couldn't speak for 9 months, all the while Elizabeth's swelling belly was speaking loud and clear = God keeps His promises. I wonder what Zechariah was thinking when he first saw his little boy, his son. Then, on that 8th day, when the boy would be circumcised and presumably named Zechariah. Zechariah, having learned his lesson wrote on a tablet 'His name is John' meaning Yahweh is gracious. And in time, just as Gabriel had said, that little John boy became the man we know as John the Baptizer, the forerunner of the Savior of the world. The lesson Zechariah learned and his story passed onto us this Advent service is = before we can speak of God's Word, we must listen to God's Word. And that is what I want to talk to you about a little bit this first midweek Advent service. As we just sang, 'Be still my soul, the Lord is on your side'.

I. We live lives filled with sound, noise actually. Many of us wake in the a.m. to the noise of an alarm clock. We listen to the noise of the a.m. news doom and gloom, so we feel informed. We head out into the world's noise of traffic and people, cell phones ringing, ipods or MP3 players. Where ever we go we

are inundated with sound, noise. I'm not implying all these things are necessarily bad unto themselves. But I'm afraid we allow the world's constant noise to rob us of quietness, rob us of things that might be more important than the things of this world? Don't we allow these gifts of technology to become burdens and curses rather than blessings. Sometimes people like to surround themselves with all this noise because they cannot bear silence. Because silence gives people time to think, contemplate, assess their hearts and souls, their lives. And that can be very uncomfortable at times. But, God still calls us to silence whether we like it or not, so we can listen, so we can hear His voice, His Word, His Word of promise and of life.

II. The Bible, God's Word is filled with examples of deliberate silence. **1 Kings 19, Elijah heard God in 'a still small voice', Ps. 46 tells us 'be still and know that the Lord is God'. Many times Jesus took His disciples to a quiet place (Mark 6).** There is always a purpose for this silence with God, a holy purpose for quiet with God. Zechariah was rightly terrified by the Angel Gabriel appearing to him. Because as a sinner he was terrified of the holiness. Though the world likes to excuse its wickedness and laugh off its guilt or drown out its conscience with noise. God's Word reminds us, **Rom. 3 'what God's Law says, it says ... so every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God'.** Hearing God's Law shows us who we are = sinners and how we have failed = sinned and there's nothing we can say to change that reality. No excuse we can give will change the fact we are sinners accountable to a holy God. No amount of noise can drown out God's Lawful verdict = we are guilty before God, so shut your mouth. But God's Word doesn't leave us there. God calls us to silence so we can hear the surprising words of His grace and mercy. **'Almighty God, our heavenly Father, has had mercy upon us and has given His only Son to die for us and for His sake forgives us all our sins. To those who believe on His name He gives power to become the children of God and has promised them His Holy Spirit. He that believes and is baptized shall be saved. Grant this, Lord, unto us all'.** We don't deserve to hear this Holy Absolution and more than Zechariah deserved to hear the promise of the angel Gabriel. And we should be stunned to silence upon hearing such good news that we sinners are forgiven. Sometimes we are stunned by an unexpected gift from another person. 'What a surprise. I don't know what to say'. How much more are we stunned as God gives us gifts that are truly undeserved. As He gives us His gifts of Word and Sacrament. How true God's Word is, **Zephaniah 3, 'The Lord will quiet you by His love'.** As a parent quiets a child who's hurting, so God quiets us with His tender love and mercy. We can be still, we can be quiet knowing we are loved, knowing we are cared for, knowing we are safe in God's everlasting arms.

III. As we quietly hear God's voice, God calls us to trust his promises. Zechariah was called to the same trust. Luke says Zechariah and Elizabeth were upright, they trusted God. And yet even those who know and trust the Lord fail. Some how when the promises of God got personal, Zechariah found room for doubt that God's promises were really personally for him and his life. Like Zechariah we have received many promises from God's Word personally also. And we have something more than Zechariah had, we have Zechariah's story and example. We are called to personally believe what God's Word says. We have heard the very voice of God, not through angels but through God Himself incarnate, Jesus Christ. Zechariah was given two miraculous signs and in time he believed. But the miraculous signs we have been given are even greater. We have the message of Zechariah's son, John the Baptist and we have the message of God's Son, Jesus Christ. We have the greatest sign of all, the birth, the life, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension of our Savior who speaks to us His words of forgiveness of all our sins.

Conclusion: God calls us to be quiet this Advent season if for no amount of time than this midweek Advent service. God calls us to simply listen to His voice. God calls us to hear His promises. God calls us to quiet our surroundings, our hearts, our minds, be still my soul, so that the noise, the cacophony, the chaos of our sinful nature, of this sinful world, of Satan's temptations, of death's fears can be silenced. And then God calls us to speak, to sing, to shout, to praise, to voice our worship of Jesus as our Lord and Savior as we are doing this Advent service. Amen