

Zechariah's problem

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 9, 2015](#) issue



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Some preachers have a nightmare of being in front of a congregation and realizing that one's sermon notes are missing. In my days as a preacher, I sometimes dreamed that I was late for the service and wouldn't get there on time, or that I was still in my pajamas or wearing a Cubs T-shirt. I once dreamed that I'd slept through the alarm and heard the organ playing the processional hymn. I suppose I should submit all this stuff to analysis. No wonder one of my favorite Bible stories is about a clergyman realizing that he cannot speak.

Luke begins the Christmas story with Elizabeth and Zechariah, a childless couple who live in the hill country of Judah. Zechariah is a priest, and at one point he's selected to perform a high holy act—he enters the inner sanctuary alone, lights incense at the altar, and emerges to bless the congregation. But while he's in the sanctuary an angel appears and tells him that Elizabeth will have a son. The angel instructs him to name the baby John and says that John will prepare the way for God's own son.

Zechariah is scared and skeptical and says so. The angel strikes him dumb. (I've always liked the idea that God tells a religious professional to stop talking.) When

the baby is born, Zechariah asks for a tablet and writes, "His name is John." With that his voice returns, and he says, "Blessed be the God of Israel . . . he has raised up a mighty savior for us."

Men need to be careful with this story and all stories about conception, pregnancy, and childbirth. I learned this early in my ministry, when I preached a sermon about the biblical figure Sarah, who became pregnant at an old age and said, "God has brought laughter for me." I went on and on about how wonderful it was that Sarah was pregnant, and how joyful she must have been. A woman who was the mother of two teenagers and an 18-month-old stopped me afterward and said, "You know, pregnancy is not always joyful. We love our son dearly, but at the time it was no laughing matter."

Another woman I know said, after listening to some men pontificate about conception and abortion, that God should dispatch a second angel to do what Gabriel did to Zechariah.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that Zechariah's sin was not so much doubt and disbelief as "a failure of imagination . . . a habit of hopelessness." Zechariah is the one who is truly barren because he cannot imagine a different future, cannot entertain something new and hopeful. His is the barrenness of all of us who fall into despair because we cannot imagine or have given up on a world different from the one that we confront every morning in the newspaper. Advent is God's response—God's quiet, re-creating, reconciling intrusion into the world and into our own lives.

Kathleen Norris says, "I read Zechariah's punishment as a grace, in that he could not say anything to further compound his initial arrogance when confronted with mystery. When he does speak again it is to praise God: he's had nine months to think it over."

With its softer light and lengthening shadows, Advent reminds us that some things should be pondered rather than explained. Religion should be about listening as well as teaching, being silent rather than talking. Sometimes at Advent the most faithful thing we can do is keep silence.

The hymn based on the liturgy of St. James is one way to begin the season:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
And with fear and trembling stand;

Ponder nothing earthly-minded,
For with blessing in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.