

I resent people calling me, “Zechariah the Silent”? It’s true, for nine months I was unable to croak out a single “Shalom!” to those I passed on the street. But ever since God opened my mouth again I have not stopped praising him for what he did for me...and for you. I’m here to tell you about that in my Christmas Carol for Advent. May this song be a blessing on your Advent preparations.

But who am I exactly? I was the father of John the baptizer. He was the one who prepared the way for the coming of our Savior, Jesus. I was also an active priest who regularly served in the temple in Jerusalem. Unlike many of my fellow priests, I actually believed in what I was doing. I was careful not to just go through the motions of worship as if merely chopping up an animal and throwing it on the altar earned God’s favor. No, I understood that those animal sacrifices were an expression of God’s favor. They illustrated how God willingly accepted a substitute to be punished for our sins. I guess that’s a little bit like your scientists today conducting medical tests on animals for the benefit of humans. But oh, how my wife Elizabeth and I longed for the day when God would send the real substitute for our sins. This Messiah had been promised thousands of years earlier.

There was something else that my wife and I longed for: children. In our day and age if you didn’t have children, people suspected that God was punishing you for some sin. Elizabeth and I knew that we were indeed sinners but the Evangelist Luke himself wrote about us that we were “upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and regulations blamelessly” (Luke 1:6). He described us the way Moses had described Noah from the Old Testament. That’s quite an honor!

So why didn’t God answer our prayers for a child? There were times when we thought that God owed us for being such faithful believers. But who were we kidding? God doesn’t owe sinners anything. Is that perhaps a truth you need to be reminded of tonight? Have you been pouring your heart out to God for something you think you really need – a companion, more income, more energy, less pain, a house of your own – but it seems as if you might as well be speaking to a brick wall because God hasn’t answered? Oh but he has. So far the answer has been “no.” Don’t give up. Keep praying and keep entrusting yourself to a God who knows you better than you know yourself. If God doesn’t give you what you want, it’s because he’s given what you need right now.

Should God answer your prayer with a “yes,” don’t be surprised as I was. Let me tell you more about that. It happened when I was in the temple offering incense. The purpose of this was to illustrate how all the prayers of the faithful rose to God, like the smoke of incense wafting up and up. While the priest offered incense, the faithful would offer their prayers outside the temple. I of course added my own petitions. I prayed for the well-being of our people. I prayed that God would turn many hearts back to him. And yes, out of habit, I prayed that God would grant Elizabeth and me a child. And then suddenly an angel appeared, and I think my heart stopped for a couple of seconds I was so scared! But he said: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be

great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. 16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God.

Wow! Not only was God going to give us a child, that child would be God's forerunner to prepare the way for the Messiah and to turn hearts back to him. More than one of my requests was being answered with a "yes"! You would think a mature believer like me would high-five the angel before tearing out of the temple to share the good news with everyone. I'm ashamed to say that's not how it played out. Instead I doubted. I mean had the angel forgotten that my wife was not only sterile but also past the age of child-bearing? When I expressed these facts, Gabriel, as the angel was called, solemnly announced: "...you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time" (Luke 1:20).

Oiye! I was of course glad that God didn't change his mind and give this child to another couple. Still, do you know how inconvenient it is for a priest to lose his voice? After the incense offering I was expected to bless the gathered worshippers. They must have thought that I had forgotten the words of the Blessing – something you might expect from a rookie. But with many hand gestures I was able to convince them that I had experienced something supernatural and was now unable to speak. Because I could still write, I was able to communicate clearly to Elizabeth what had happened. Unlike me, she believed the angel's word and was overjoyed to hear that God was going to give us a son.

Let me just pause here to emphasize a truth I was reminded of that day: God wants his Word taken seriously. You may think that Word restrictive, like how God says that sex is something only to be enjoyed by those who are married to each other – not planning on getting married. Or how you are to honor those in authority – even the clueless boss or the less than motivated and motivating teacher. God frankly doesn't care about your opinion on those matters. He, the Creator of the universe has spoken. But because he's also your Savior you can be certain that he has spoken in such a way as to benefit you. When I was talking to your pastor about this he mused that it would be like a car owner who ignores the maintenance recommendations in his car manual because he thinks they're restrictive. "Change the oil every 3000 miles? Who has time for that? Rotate the tires every 8,000 -10,000 miles? They're just trying to make work for mechanics!" But someone who never bothers to read his car manual and abide by the recommendations will only wear out his vehicle more quickly and put himself and others in danger. That's true too of those who don't bother to live by God's manual.

But God doesn't just shout out commands in that manual called a Bible; he also promises. He wants you to take those promises seriously too. That doesn't mean just believing that Jesus exists; it means believing that Jesus exists for you! It means trusting that Jesus' death has paid for your sins no matter what they are. Would you be more apt to believe God's promises if an angel delivered them? Hah! If you think that, you haven't been paying attention to my true story. An angel did deliver God's promise and I still doubted!

That God-imposed silence gave me lots of time to think about the impending birth of my son. I spent hours dreaming of what I wanted to teach him and the places I wanted to take him. But while John would be my son, Gabriel had made it clear that John was first and foremost God's servant. That's true of your children and grandchildren too you know. No, I haven't been sent by God to tell you that your grandson has been chosen to be the next pastor at Open Bible, or that your daughter is destined to spend years teaching English in a foreign country where she will also support mission work. But your children do belong to God. Have you encouraged them to think of serving the Lord in the full-time ministry? Or to serve the Lord in their churches?

I was so happy when my son was finally born but I remained unable to speak. It was only eight days later, at his circumcision, that God unloosed my tongue. It happened after I asserted through a written note that the baby not be named after me as relatives were insisting. He was to be called John, as Gabriel had instructed. John was a fitting name because it means "the Lord has been gracious." Indeed, the Lord had been gracious to Elizabeth and me by giving us this son in our old age. But he was also gracious to all because this son would prepare the way for the Messiah who was about to come. When I finally spoke for the first time in nine months, God the Holy Spirit gave me his words to proclaim.

I praised God, because he had come to redeem his people. To redeem means to buy back at a great cost. God was going to bring his people back into his family at a great cost. He was going to send a horn of salvation into this world from the house of David to do this. The word horn means, strong, powerful help. I may not have fully understood it at the time, but this was more than just deliverance from the Romans, but a spiritual deliverance from our sins. God was simply keeping his promises that he had made long ago, to people like Abraham. Abraham had been told that a Messiah would come from his bloodline, and through that Messiah all nations on earth would be blessed. That reminds me of the faithfulness of God. No matter how it appears at the moment, God will not forget the promises he has made. He will be true to them.

In addition, God has been merciful to me and you. To show mercy means to show kindness and care to someone who doesn't deserve that kindness. An example of mercy would be if you were traveling on Morse Avenue at 50 miles an hour and a cop pulled you over. He has every right to punish you with a hefty ticket, but instead, says, I am going to let you off. Not give you the punishment you deserve. That's what God did for Abraham and for all of us. We have spoken harshly at times. We have hurt the feelings of others. We have broken the commandments of our God. But our God has been merciful. He let us off the hook. Instead of giving us the punishment we deserve He satisfied his justice by sending the horn of salvation into the world, Jesus Christ. Jesus came to be punished for us.

And you know, my son is the one who would prepare the way for this Jesus. My son, would make it clear to people that they were sick, that they needed a Savior. And he would then point out Jesus as the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. Yes, Jesus, the Messiah has come as promised. He has rescued us from sin so that we now serve him without fear. Because of this I am no longer Zechariah the Silent but Zechariah the Jubilant! Join me as we praise our Savior-God with the song I sang when my son was 8 days old.