

“Shut the Fear Up!”

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Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:68-79

Do you know what your name means? My name, Leah, in Hebrew, means “weary.” I wonder if the biblical woman Leah felt weary because she was mother to 6 sons and one daughter, and shared her husband Jacob with her sister and two concubines. I get weary too, thinking about the family and power dynamics there. While I don’t feel weary, I do like the name Leah, because it ties me back to a significant woman in the biblical story.

Names mean something in the bible. You should know that the blessing Zechariah speaks in our gospel passage this morning comes right after the naming of Zechariah’s son with Elizabeth. “His name is John.” John-- or *Yochanan* in Hebrew- means *Yahweh is Gracious*.

For Elizabeth and Zechariah, having a son at their age was indeed a gracious act. Zechariah was a priest, and Elizabeth traced her lineage all the way back to Aaron, the brother of Moses. While Zechariah was in the sanctuary offering incense to the Lord and bringing the peoples’ prayers to God, an angel appeared to him. Zechariah was terrified; fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, “do not be afraid, Zechariah.” Now, one or both of Zechariah and Elizabeth must have prayed for a child, because the angel told Zechariah, “Your prayer has been heard; your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you will name him John.”

But Zechariah asked the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and I am getting on in years.” Zechariah’s second guessing of the

angel has echoes of Sarah's laughter when The Lord told her that she and Abraham would have a son in their very old age.

The angel Gabriel told Zechariah, "well, I just came by to give you the good news; but if you want to stand there gaping in disbelief, fine. You will now become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

And that was that. Zechariah did not speak for 9 months. He did not speak when Mary, also pregnant, came to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit upon seeing Mary, and the child within her leaped for joy. Indeed, the child Elizabeth was bearing, would become-- as his father proclaimed in his blessing-- "the prophet of the Most High," going before the Lord to prepare his ways and give knowledge of salvation to his people." God is gracious, indeed.

When John was actually born, the people around Elizabeth and Zechariah commented, "You're going to name this baby Zechariah like his daddy!" But Elizabeth said "No, he is to be called John." The people didn't believe Elizabeth. They called out the names of other male relatives as suggestions, saying, "But no one in your family is called John!"

At that point, Zechariah motioned for someone to bring him his writing tablet. "His name is John." Immediately, Zechariah's mouth was opened and his tongue freed. He had the power to speak once more.

The gospel lesson tells us something about recognizing the power of silence...but also recognizing the power of speech.

Being silent for 9 months must have given Zechariah the chance to choose his words with care and meaning, assuming he'd ever be allowed to speak again. While Elizabeth gestated a child, a prophet, in her womb, Zechariah prepared to give birth to *words* once more, and I am guessing he never again took for granted the power of the words he could say.

Some of us, during Advent, need to find time for silence.

When Kai and I got home from Kai's violin practice yesterday, we were greeted by Chris in her bathrobe, her face rigid with a shiny green layer. I could see that she had just applied a beauty mask and would need to be still and keep from talking for a half hour or so to get that extra glow in her skin. But I also recognized this "beauty mask" for what it really was: one of the many introvert rituals Chris uses when she must be around people for any length of time. You see, we were about to begin a full day we had planned in the city with Chris' parents and her sister and her family. While Chris loves her family, she often has to have a private conversation with herself to remember to keep a gracious attitude around the people she loves. She also has to "power up" by being by herself and/or being quiet. While her face was frozen from speech, I managed to tell Chris about the credit card I had accidentally left at Costco the day before and also told Kai, "Quick, if you need to tell Mommy anything that might make her mad, now might be the time to do it!"

This morning I woke up with very little voice. You almost got a sermon written on a tablet and delivered by someone else's voice today! But I saved up for you and refrained from talking to my family all morning so I could preach; for Chris, it was probably another one of her introvert dreams come true. It gives me the tiniest feeling of what newcomers experience when they come to this country and have all these rich thoughts in their minds, but no way of expressing them in the English language others can understand.

I am not naturally an introvert. So for me, an important spiritual practice is from time to time is to shut my mouth and practice listening-- to those around me, and to God. My hope is that I not be like Zechariah, in that although he was a priest and it was his calling to offer prayers to God, he never really expected God to answer him back. My hope is that I will be

ready when God is trying to talk to me. Right now, I am not completely sure that I will be. So, I need to build more space for quiet listening and contemplation in my life.

Some of us, during Advent, need to find time for silence. Yet some of us-- these may be the same people, or a different set of people-- need to find the power to speak.

Advent is a time when we focus on what is most important: faith, family and friends, hope for the future. The time is pregnant with opportunity to say something that really matters to the people around you. These may be sorts of things that we are too fearful to say. But, as Zechariah's words proclaim, because God has shown mercy, we might serve God without fear. So, here goes: these are the kinds of things I have heard people say that took great courage, or if they were not spoken, these are the things I know others in my ministry have longed to have their loved ones say to them.

"I work hard as a provider, and usually that is how I show my love for this family. But today I want to say the words I never say to you. I love you."

"I feel like I am heading into a depression, and I need your support because I am scared."

"You know I go to church just about every week. But I have never shared with you why my faith is important to me. Would you like to hear why this God-thing matters to me?"

"Can we talk about my hopes for my end-of-life care?"

"I know you and I disagree on which political leaders we like and trust. But I would like to hear from you-- and I will shut my mouth and just listen-- *why*

you like the person you voted for, and how that person matches your hopes for your life and for the country.”

“I feel like you and I have become strangers in what was once a rich and loving relationship. I am sure I had a role to play in where we have arrived. But I do not want this to be our final destination. Will you work with me in rediscovering what love means for us at this stage in our lives together?”

“I would rather have more time together with my parents than fancy things at Christmas.”

What are the words you might say if fear were not holding you back?

In order for us to have the power to speak, we have to find a way to shut the fears up. For any of the kinds of things I just listed as courageous conversations, there is a risk. The person you are talking to could laugh in your face, or get angry, or even worse, just walk away. They could take the thing you said and somehow use it against you.

These things could happen. But we should not what could also happen is that these words could lead us into a deeper experience of love and connection. These words can move us from individualism to intimacy and even point us towards God’s love. When we use our words with power, it can-- as Zechariah said of John who would point the way to Jesus-- “give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Malachi speaks of God sending a messenger who comes like a refining fire. This does not seem like a comfortable image, because a fire burns away anything unstable enough to sustain its heat. All the impurities melt away. A silversmith knows that the refining process is complete only when she observes her own image reflected in the mirror-like surface of the metal.

Maybe the image of God is like that too. When we share the words that are truly the messages God is trying to offer us, we begin to look again like the holy one who created us; our humanity is restored to the goodness and righteousness for which we were created when the divine image is reflected in the human heart.¹

Unlike Matthew and Luke, John's gospel has no birth story for Jesus. Instead, John starts with this: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. May God's word take root in you this Advent so that, when you are ready to speak, when you are no longer afraid, it may be born in powerful ways. Amen.

¹ Taken from "Malachi 3:1-4: Theological Perspective" by Jennifer Ayers in *Feasting on the Word: Advent Companion* eds. Bartlett, Taylor and Long