

From Temple Logic to Tender Mercy
(Advent Four)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Luke 1:5-15a, 18-20, 57-64, 68-78

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah (*uh-BY-juh*). His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.

But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
who has looked with favor on the people and redeemed them.
God has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of God's servant David,
as God spoke through the mouth of the holy prophets from of old,

that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors
and remembered the the holy covenant,
the oath sworn to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before God all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way,
to give God's people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.
Because of the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to shine on those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

From Temple Logic to Tender Mercy

There's a particular kind of heartbreak that accompanies the phrase, "But I did everything right." I followed the rules. I did my part. I showed up. I stayed faithful. And still ...

Most of us, whether we realize it or not, live according to an unwritten formula—a belief that if we just do x, y, or z, then God or the universe or the fates will keep us safe and protect the people we care about. It's why, when we hear of a tragedy, we tend to want to know the circumstances—*what happened? What led up to it? Who did it happen to?* And perhaps most importantly, *how are we different from them?* We ask questions not to blame victims, but out of a hope that if we could just identify some unwritten rule that was broken or some way in which we are different, we might be able to keep the same thing from happening to us.

It is, I suspect, how most of us understand faith and our moral lives as well—that deep-seated belief that if we live faithfully, God will love us, that if we live justly, we can earn our way into heaven. It's part of what made the TV show, *The Good Place*, so popular when it aired a number of years ago. In the show four characters find themselves in an afterlife governed by a points system: do enough good things, earn enough points, and you end up in the Good Place. Fall short and, well, you just might find yourself someplace not quite so pleasant. The promise of the system, the reason so many of us default to these beliefs, is that they offer clarity and control. The comfort of knowing how things work and the ability to affect our own outcomes.

Only, as the characters in the show discover—and as life itself eventually teaches us—the system doesn't work. The world is too complicated, our choices too layered. Even our best intentions carry unintended consequences the system cannot account for. In the end, things simply do not add up. There is no formula we can follow—no set of choices that guarantees safety, spares us from loss, or explains why tragedy comes.

Something Zechariah knew only too well.

The text tells us that Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were “righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.” Zechariah was a priest in the Temple, someone who had devoted his entire life to serving God, and it has been a long life of faithful service because Zechariah and Elizabeth are old. Old, old. Zechariah has done everything right. He has followed all the rules. And yet, Zechariah and Elizabeth have remained childless.

But Zechariah isn't one to rage against an unjust system. He is a priest—someone entrusted with maintaining the order of things. And so he has learned how to live faithfully inside a life that hasn't turned out the way he expected.

And then one day, in the course of his priestly duties, Zechariah is alone inside the sanctuary, near the altar of incense, the very heart of the Temple, the place where heaven and earth were believed to meet. And an angel appears.

For years, Zechariah has prayed faithfully without demanding answers. He has learned how to live with unanswered prayers. And now an angel appears and says, “Your prayers have been heard.”

At first glance, it seems like the system has finally begun to work, that the math might finally be adding up, that all of Zechariah's and Elizabeth's faithfulness is finally being recognized and rewarded—a baby. It is prayers answered and dreams come true. But for a man who has lived faithfully even though things have not turned out the way he expected, it is also unsettling. *Why now? What has changed?* And so Zechariah asks the question we all ask when our world is turned upside down: how can this be so?

Gabriel, however, simply says, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.” Which is a non-answer if ever there was one. And then, as if to add insult to injury, he adds, “because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” No explanation. No reassurance. No clarification of how this will work or why now. Instead there is silence.

The story moves on, jumping ahead to the time of Elizabeth's delivery, but if we don't pause, we risk missing what God is doing.

Because it's tempting to hear the silence as punishment, to imagine Zechariah is being scolded for asking the wrong question or not believing enough. But that doesn't quite fit. Zechariah isn't cynical, or mocking, or even disbelieving. He's simply trying to understand how this new information fits inside the life he's always known. So why is he rendered mute? Luke doesn't say. The story offers no footnote, no theological explanation, only silence.

For a Temple priest to be rendered mute is to be rendered redundant. A Temple priest's voice is their instrument. For months, Zechariah cannot speak. He cannot explain. He cannot correct the story. He cannot manage expectations or shape the narrative or make the miracle make sense. The voice of the priest—the one trained to recite, to bless, to interpret—is silenced.

But the silence is not God slamming a door, shutting Zechariah out. The silence is an invitation—an opportunity for Zechariah to step outside the system that has shaped his faith and into a new way of seeing and know God. Because in that silence, something happens.

Zechariah is forced to watch. To listen. To wait. The silence becomes a kind of mercy—a holy interruption that makes room for something new to grow. The silence frees Zechariah from the need to interpret, understand, or decide what this miracle means before it has even fully arrived.

Sometimes grace doesn't come as an answer. Sometimes it comes as a pause.

Sometimes God's kindness is not in giving us more words, but in giving us fewer—so that we can learn, again, how to receive what we cannot control. The silence isn't punishment; it's what remains when we let go of our need to explain.

And, in time, the promise comes to pass. Elizabeth gives birth to a son. Neighbors and relatives gather. There is joy, relief, amazement—everything we expect when long-awaited life finally arrives. But on the eighth day, when it comes time to name the child, the system reasserts itself. The assumptions return. Of course the baby will be named Zechariah, after his father. That is how it works. That is how it has always worked.

But Elizabeth says no.

And when they turn to Zechariah—still silent, still watching—he asks for a tablet. He does not argue. He does not explain. He simply writes, "His name is John."

Not a name rooted in lineage. Not a name that preserves the past. Instead, a name that literally means "God is gracious". In that moment, Zechariah does try to defend himself or make sense of what has happened; he simply names grace. And when he does, his mouth is opened. His tongue is freed. And the first thing he does is praise God.

When Zechariah finally speaks, he doesn't return to the language of rules or explanations. He doesn't try to make sense of what has happened or justify why now. He sings. And what he sings about is not himself, or even his long-awaited son. He sings about a God who keeps promises—not by fixing the system, not by making everything add up, but by interrupting the system with mercy. Zechariah sings of a God who remembers. A God who has not forgotten the people or the covenant, even though history has been long and hope has been thin. Zechariah sings of salvation, not as escape, but as freedom to live without fear, to serve God not because we are anxious to earn something, but because we have already been met with mercy. And when Zechariah finally turns his attention to the child in his arms, he doesn't describe power or success or certainty. He sings of preparation. Of making a way. Of helping people recognize salvation not through victory or domination, but through forgiveness.

And at the center of his song is the astonishing phrase: *the tender mercy of our God*.

Not a mercy that explains itself. Not a mercy that waits for us to get it right. But a mercy that arrives like dawn—slowly, gently, without asking permission or waiting for us to be ready. Zechariah doesn't just receive mercy; his life begins to move differently because of it, inviting us to wonder what it might look like to practice mercy in our own lives.

Sometimes practicing mercy means choosing presence over productivity, staying when it would be easier to move on. Sitting with someone in grief or uncertainty, without trying to fix it. Trusting that our presence is enough, and that God is already at work, even when we can't see how.

And sometimes practicing mercy looks like naming grace when the world around us would name failure. It looks like noticing how quickly we turn people into sums and scores. How easily we decide who is doing well and who has fallen behind. Who is successful. Who is responsible. Who should have known better.

Mercy interrupts the math. Mercy sounds like saying to someone who is exhausted or grieving or struggling, *You are not a problem to be solved*. It sounds like saying to a child or a friend, *Your worth does not depend on what you do*. It sounds like speaking belovedness over a life that math would label disappointing, unproductive, or behind schedule. And mercy sounds like speaking that same truth to ourselves, especially when we are tempted to measure our lives by outcomes.

When we are present, when we name grace where others might name failure, we free people from the need to justify their lives, we embody the promise that grace speaks a truth deeper than any formula ever could. We offer mercy.

Zechariah enters the silence a priest trained in the rituals. But he emerges a prophet formed by God's tender mercy.

The invitation of the story is not to admire that transformation, but to wonder what might change *in us* if we stopped trying to make the formulas work, and started living by mercy instead.

Amen.