

### ***Three Silent Priests and Two Disgraced Women***

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: in just a few days we will, once again, celebrate the birth of our Savior. It's an event that is, like so many other parts of the story of God's love, one in which the natural order of things is upset and overturned. Think about it: God the Son, the eternal, infinite, omnipresent, and all knowing Deity through whom all creation leapt into existence chooses to become a helpless human infant suckling at the breast of a poor Jewish girl. If we didn't already know the story, there's no way anyone of us could have imagined such a thing taking place. And here, though he is King of kings and Lord of lords whose glory fills the skies, he decides to make his palace a rustic stable and his throne a trough for feeding livestock. It just doesn't seem right to us—and yet, in a way, it does seem consistent. That's because as people accustomed to hearing the Word, we know that God simply doesn't do things that seem right in the eyes of the world. On the contrary, we're told that he chooses the low, the weak, and the despised things in order to bring to naught the things that we esteem so highly; and further that he makes his wisdom known in foolish things precisely to confound the celebrated wisdom and knowledge of mankind. It's his way. And it's the way he chose to save us. Because in choosing the unexpected path to become a man and to be born in a barn, we see a foreshadow of the greatest upset of all time: when he, the Holy God who gave the Law and keeps it perfectly, will give himself to die for the benefit of rebellious lawbreakers who despise him.

Today's Gospel also fits the pattern of upsetting the natural order. It's the episode we call *the Visitation*, when the young virgin mother Mary, who has only recently conceived the Christ Child in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit goes to sojourn her much elder kinswoman, Elizabeth, who is now in the sixth month of her own miraculous pregnancy. Elizabeth is carrying the child who will later be known as John the Baptizer. We just heard the account read, so we know that it consists mostly of a dialogue between two people, namely Mary and Elizabeth. But in order to fully appreciate the ironic upset of what's taking place, we need to see that there are actually five people involved in the story. And in unpacking it, I'd like to start with those who are mentioned least.

The first is Zechariah, the priest in whose home the action happens. From a human point of view we would have expected him to play a greater part in what's going on. He is, after all, a highly respected member of the community. He's a priest of God who on a rotational schedule serves with his division of fellow priests at the Temple in Jerusalem. There he performs the sacrifices through which the Lord declares his people forgiven of their sins. And there too he has several times been selected to be the one chosen to go into second most sacred place on earth, the Holy Place, there to offer the prayers of the nation at the Altar of Incense immediately before the heavy curtain behind which the Lord God is present – a rare honor indeed. The rest of the year he spends back here in his home in the Judean hill country teaching, counseling, and helping to oversee the affairs of the synagogue and community. Oh, and he's been at it for a long time. And remember this is a culture that showed immense reverence for the wisdom and experience acquired by years of faithful service. So, when Zechariah says something, people sit up and take notice: "Quiet now, the venerable Zechariah is speaking." And that's why it's so unusual that the text only mentions him in passing. He only gets his name in the credits as being the homeowner.

Of course, there's a reason we don't hear more from him, and that's that he can't speak. He's been struck mute by an angel on account of his doubt and unbelief. It happened at his last rotation serving at the Temple. He'd been chosen for the privilege of going into the Holy Place to offer the prayers at the altar of incense. These were the prescribed prayers that expressed the deepest desires of the whole Jewish nation. And chief among the longings of the Jewish heart was the prayer we sing in the Advent hymn, "*O come, Emmanuel, ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here.*" Really, that prayer summed up the entire work of Zechariah's long life. Everything he studied in Scripture, everything he taught to others, every ritual action he performed, all of it pointed ahead to the fulfillment of that prayer: to the day when the Messiah would appear and redeem his people. And while he was praying on that fateful day six months ago, suddenly an angel appeared beside him and announced, "Don't be afraid Zechariah, your prayer has been heard." The angel went on to explain that Zechariah and Elizabeth would have the honor of being the parents of the Messiah's forerunner: the promised prophet who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way of the Lord.

It was the best news Zechariah could have heard: the fulfillment of not only the nation's hopes, but also of his and his wife's long since abandoned hope of having a child of their own. The angel told him his dreams had come true. But at hearing this happy announcement, Zechariah choked. His faith faltered. So accustomed was he to practicing "waiting in disappointment" that when the time came for the Lord to take action, he was unprepared. He didn't believe it. He demanded a sign from the angel to prove what he was saying was true—as if having an angel appear and speak to you isn't sign enough! The angel said (and I'm paraphrasing a bit here), "Okay, wise guy, you want a sign? Here it is: because you don't believe the words you've been praying, or what you've been studying, doing, and telling others for a lifetime, and since you don't believe me now, your mouth is shut up. You will not be able to speak again until these things are fulfilled." And so it happens that the venerable priest Zechariah, the one who by human standards should have had top billing in this story, is mostly conspicuous by his silence.

That brings us to another person only briefly mentioned in the text, though this one is part of the action at least. But like his father, he has nothing to say. I refer to the yet-to-be born infant John, of course. From a long line of Levites, this son of a priest is destined to become a priest himself – though his priesthood will be very different than those who came before him. Where others performed rituals, offered sacrifices, prayed prayers, and spoke words that pointed ahead to the day when Messiah would come, John is the one who would point to the Messiah and say, "There he is. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." As a result, it's fair to say that John will be the last of his priestly order. When the highpoint of his ministry comes, there will be no more waiting, no more sacrifices that picture what the Messiah will do when he comes. These will be replaced by rejoicing in the presence of the Messiah and celebrating what God has already done and continues to do through him. And that's what we see John doing in the story. At the sound of Mary's voice he begins to leap for joy. That's because in her the Word is made flesh. And by the revelation of the Spirit through her greeting, John knows that his Lord is present. And as he will do some thirty years later, with every fiber of his being he announces the fulfillment of the promise. Like his father, he can't speak – but he can show his faith, and he does. So there's a contrast here: Zechariah, for lack of faith, turned out to be all talk and no action. The result was that God took away his ability to speak. John believes; and at this point he's all action and no talk. In the end he will be granted the honor of delivering the best news of all to God's people: that the Messiah is here.

And that in turn brings us to yet another priest of God who has no lines to speak in this account. In fact, other than Elizabeth referring to the embryonic Jesus and "my Lord", nothing is

said about him at all. And yet the whole story revolves around him. He is the central figure. He's the reason these people have come together in the first place. He's the reason we gather here. And though in neither place does he speak directly himself, his Word is being heard coming from the mouths of others – but even then, in this story, not from the people you'd expect.

What I'd have you see is that part of the theme of overturning the natural order that's unfolding in this text is that we have three priests whose job it is to declare the truths of God's Word, but they are all silent. Instead, through their conversation, the ones doing the proclamation of the Gospel by inspiration of the Holy Spirit are two women, who, on account of their normal roles in society, ordinarily wouldn't be given that task. Now, there may be a few cynical fellows out there thinking, "C'mon, women doing all the talking while the men are silent; what's so unusual about that?" Trust me, whatever your own personal experience may be, in the Bible this is a very rare thing. And something to remember is that these are not just ordinary women; but two women that would have been held in fairly low esteem in this society. No, low esteem is too soft a term; they would have been thought of as disgraced women.

Consider Elizabeth: in a culture that placed such a high value on children and family, and in which a woman's highest honor lay in bringing new lives into the world and nurturing them, she would have been held in disgrace on account of her barrenness. While both she and her husband would have shared in the aching pain of desiring children and not being able to have them, they would not have shared it equally. It would have been particularly grievous for Elizabeth. Zechariah at least could occupy himself and find fulfillment in his highly honored profession. Elizabeth would have been left empty and unfulfilled. And on top of her private misery, she would have borne the disdain of others: the village folk talking behind her back in hushed tones, "Poor Elizabeth, that barren tree, that fruitless vine. Who knows what secret sin has provoked the Lord to curse her so?"

But now in the realization of God's promise, her previous misfortune and sadness have been overturned. While her contemporaries are beginning to experience the sadness of "empty nest syndrome", she's preparing her home for a new arrival. We can assume that her elation rises to heights not known to other expectant mothers precisely because of her many years of disappointment and sorrow. Now the Lord has taken away her disgrace and will soon fill her arms with the deepest desire of her heart. And doubly so, for this she knows will not be just any child, but one who will be great in the sight of God and his people. He will do the work of preparing the way of the Lord. And she is honored by God in sharing in this work by preparing the way for his prophet.

And then there is Mary, who is another disgraced woman – or she will be in the near future. When she returns to Nazareth in a few months, society's judgment will fall hard on her: an engaged woman who goes away for a while without her fiancé and comes back home very obviously in a family way is going to be the talk of the town. She will bring shame on her family and heartbreak to Joseph, her betrothed. All the while she will know the truth, and later he will too; but in the eyes of others she will have to bear the disgrace all her life. Even in Jesus' adulthood, his enemies will consistently make the accusation that his was an illegitimate birth. In this (in a small way) Mary foreshadows the mission of the holy Child she bears, for he too will be condemned by the world though he is innocent. But the shame and disgrace Mary will soon face doesn't seem to bother her too much. Instead, by faith, she looks forward to a day when all generations will call her blessed. And as Elizabeth says, she is blessed now by believing that what God has promised her will be fulfilled.

Mary's words of praise to God for the great things he has done for her are recorded for us in the hymn we call the Magnificat, the whole theme of which is how the Lord overturns the standard state of affairs to do the unexpected. He puts down the proud and raises the humble. He gives to those who are hungry and in need, and he sends the rich away empty handed. He condemns the self-righteous who sit in judgment of others, and he gives mercy and his righteousness to those with broken hearts, who confess their sins, and who look in hope to his promise of life in the Savior to be fulfilled.

All of which should shape our understanding and change the perspective we have as we view the world around us. It should alter the way we perceive God's ongoing work in the world even now. We tend to be drawn to success, to accomplishment, to things that appear grand and glorious. That's where we look for evidence of God's presence and blessing. But what Scripture teaches, and what we see so clearly laid out for us in today's lesson from three silent priests and two disgraced women is how the opposite is usually true. And there's a reason for that: these examples of the upset of the natural order are foreshadows of the cross where the Lord's presence and blessing will be revealed in their fullest form. There God the Son will be disgraced, humiliated, and put to death. Then, having completed his labor to give new birth to us, our great High Priest will be silent.

And his work in us continues on; but not as we might expect. We want to see it in the happy, easy, prosperous moments. That's when we think God's hand is upon us. But no, God's greatest work in us is more often going to take place when we experience the echoes and aftershocks of the cross in our lives: the sorrows, losses, and hardships. Those are the times that test and stretch faith and force us to humility and dependency on God. They best prepare us to receive Christ and his gifts of grace because, as we've seen, God gives grace to the humble. This Christmas and in all our days to come, may he keep us so prepared to receive him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***