

Worship at home
December 20, 2020

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT: LOVE



<https://www.csjoseph.org/general/fourth-sunday-of-advent-2/>

Lighting the Advent Candles:

In this season of Advent, we celebrate God's love.

Soon we will welcome the beautiful and radical love of God
as Jesus Christ comes to live among us.

We embrace our identity as God's beloved children
and let this truth guide our decisions and relationships.

In our homes and in our church, we offer hospitality,
welcoming those we don't know,
those who are in need,
and those who are different from us.

We demonstrate our care for creation
in real and tangible ways
through the products we buy,
the food we eat,
and the way we live every day.

Together, we are a sign of God's love for the world.
The candle of love is lit.

God of extravagant generosity,
in Jesus we discover the depth of your care
and the lengths you will go to save us.
Forgive us when we ignore those in need,
trample your creation
and refuse to share all that we receive from you.
Teach us to love our neighbours,
caring for each other in the name of Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Hymn: #134 “Lord, you were rich”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2_pzDHT6lY

The Word of God read and interpreted:

After the two storylines converged with Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, they diverge once more. Mary has returned to her own home and Elizabeth has now given birth to a son.

READ LUKE 1:57-80.

1. As was the custom, on the eighth day the child was to be circumcised. At that event, during which the promises of the covenant are remembered and the community recalls their identity as God’s beloved children, the child is named. Much to the amazement of their neighbours and relatives, Elizabeth and Zechariah make it known that he is named John. Elizabeth was the one who spoke because Zechariah was still under the sentence of muteness imposed upon him by God through the angel Gabriel. But, upon recording his assent to Elizabeth’s statement, Zechariah’s mouth was opened and he began to speak.

To grasp the significance of this part of the story we have to remember that this marks the end of nine months of silence for Zechariah. Shortly before Elizabeth became pregnant, Zechariah confessed his skepticism to the angel Gabriel resulting in his sentence of silence:

“Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How will I know that this is so? 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.’” (Luke 1:18-20)

I’m not convinced God silenced Zechariah simply for this moment of incredulity. It’s true that he did not yet fully believe Gabriel’s announcement. However, Luke was careful to tell us that Zechariah was a righteous and obedient man. Nine months of silence seems a little extreme for one moment of skepticism after a lifetime of faithfully waiting and praying. I wonder if there was a greater reason for God to impose this silence on the aged priest.

Specifically, I wonder what Zechariah's testimony would have been during these nine months if he hadn't been forced into a time of reflection and carefully considering his words. What would he have said to his friends and colleagues about his experience in the temple? About Elizabeth's pregnancy? About the child that was to be born?

His testimony might have been an honest expression of his emotions at that moment of time, but would it have encouraged others in their faith? Would Zechariah giving free expression to his confusions have helped to ease other people's anxieties and fears?

2. I wonder this because I've noticed that the *way* we speak of our circumstances can either build up other people's souls or tear them down.

I once sailed on the brigantine "The Eye of the Wind" and one of the crew members gave me a piece of advice: Whatever ship you sail on next, don't compare the way things are done on it with the way they're done on this ship. In other words: one might, with the best of intentions, suggest that the ropes be stored in a certain way *because that's what was done on your previous ship and it worked well*. One might make that suggestion with the purest intent of helping your current ship function smoothly; and, one might have a point, there might be a better way of storing the ropes. However, the message that is often heard is that, in your view, this crew doesn't know what it's doing.

Similarly, in the midst of this pandemic, one might suggest that certain functions be cancelled here because there are other regions that are more severely impacted by the virus whose citizens might be tempted to come here and inadvertently spread the virus. The intention is good: to minimize the spread of contagion. And the proposed action might be wise. However, the way in which it is said can transmit a message that says "those people are unclean." "Those people are stupid because they haven't taken this seriously."

The way we speak of our circumstances can build one another up, or, can wear them down.

Zechariah was a priest of notable lineage who had enough pride to demand a more detailed proof from the angel of God. I wonder what would have been the effect of his testimony if he had the freedom to speak during these nine months.

“Look how God has rewarded me for all my obedience!”?

“Hey, have you been visited by an angel? Is your faith as strong as mine?”

Maybe he would have tried to explain away the miracle: “You know, Gabriel was speaking metaphorically; we did this, that, and the other and that’s how come Elizabeth is pregnant.”

Or, maybe people simply wouldn’t have believed him.

Without the physical evidence, maybe people would have just assumed Zechariah was another overly imaginative priest who was disconnected from reality.

This is, of course, all speculation, and there’s always the risk that I’m placing too much meaning on something that wasn’t intended as such. However, it’s interesting to note that this isn’t the first time God has silenced prominent public figures. In Ezekiel 3:26-27 we read of God’s similar treatment of Ezekiel. Whatever Ezekiel said at that moment in history, wouldn’t have helped Israel’s cause. They wouldn’t have believed him. So, during his commissioning of all times, God told Ezekiel to shut himself in his home and not speak until the time was right.

Maybe Zechariah’s silence wasn’t necessarily punishment because of a moment of skepticism, but rather an awareness on God’s part that sometimes silence serves the kingdom better than words! Sometimes we need time to think before we speak.

3. After all, the theme of this time of year, the theme of these verses in Luke’s retelling of the story of Jesus’ birth, is that God has shown favour upon His creation. Elizabeth proclaimed it when she found out she was pregnant. Gabriel assured Mary of it in his announcement to her. Mary proclaimed it herself in her song to Elizabeth. And John’s very name means it. The Lord has shown favour on his people and redeemed them and that is too important a message to risk confusion.

Today is the fourth and final Sunday in Advent. We mark this passage of time by lighting the Candle of Love.

Love is one of the defining characteristics of the Triune God. And the word used most often in the New Testament to refer to this characteristic is a Greek word: *agape*.

Agape has to do with choice. It has to do with choosing someone else's welfare. It has to do with choosing to create a context in which hope, joy, and peace can thrive. To refer to God with the word *agape* is to recognize that this deity who we cannot see, consistently makes the choice to reach across the human-divine divide and bring us into his fellowship. God chooses to share His life, his grace, his Spirit with others. In Jesus of whom John will be the herald, God chooses to envelope us with everything that is pure, good, and holy not only in the age that's yet to come, but here-and-now amid the anxieties and sorrows of our day-to-day existence. By leaving the glories of heaven to live among us, Jesus gives us a model as well as explicit directions for how to live the way of His peace.

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.”

Zechariah could only speak these words of assurance and encouragement after he had spent nine months in silent observation and reflection.

And, against the wishes of relatives and neighbours, Zechariah and Elizabeth named their son John. Which means, “The Lord has shown favour.”

By the very utterance of his name, this child will, like Mary and like his mother Elizabeth, offer words that encourage faith in the favour-bestowing God and equip a confused people to live in that divine favour.

As soon as Zechariah made his written testimony his mouth was opened and he was free to speak. Now what Zechariah has to say praises God and encourages faith and obedience of God and His way of peace. He speaks to build up. He speaks to assure others of God's grace, God's trustworthiness, and God's salvation.

4. As we prepare our homes, hearts, and minds to the continual coming of Jesus this advent; as we learn from Mary to yield to the Power of the Most High; as we learn from Elizabeth to awaken to the movements of the Holy Spirit within us, let us also learn from Zechariah, particularly in this season of great fear and even mistrust, to guard our speech, our social media posts, our thoughts, and our souls so that what we say would encourage and equip others to know and to live ever more in the favour of God which He has bestowed upon humanity in the child of Mary.

And may God alone be glorified now and forevermore. Amen.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession:

Spirit of Hope,
you pierce the darkness with light, bringing hope and vision for the way ahead.
We thank you in this year of pandemic
for lessons learned and changes of heart,
for new discoveries and hope restored.
As nature around us prepares for the long sleep of winter,
we pray for those who are ill or dying,
and for those who are bereaved or feel any burden of loss.
(A silence is kept.)

O God, reach out to all of us in Christ,
and give us hope for the living of these days.

O God of Peace,
we pray for all places where violence has done its worst,
where cruelty and suspicion appear to win the day,
where the vulnerable live in fear and despair,
and where burdened souls are restless.
(A silence is kept.)

O God, reach out to all of us in Christ,
and give us peace in these times.

O Creator of Joy,
we thank you for moments of joy and celebration in our lives,
for pleasure given and received,
for quiet times spent in reflection and remembering,
and for happy gatherings, even if they had to be small.
In these colder, darker days,
we remember those who feel left out or neglected,
those who have found the months of pandemic restrictions a heavy burden,
and those we find difficult to love, even at a distance.
(A silence is kept.)

Be their light and their warmth,
O God, reach out to all of us in Christ,
and give us joy to share in the days ahead.

O Love Come Down at Christmas,
you call us to live in communion with you and one another.
You form us into families, circles of friendship, and communities.
Today we pray for our family members, whether we're close or estranged,
for our friends, whether nearby or far away,
and for neighbours who share our community, like minded or not.
(A silence is kept.)

Help us express both our love and concern in gentle words and kind actions.
O God, reach out to all of us in Christ,
and strengthen our love for you and for one another.

Hymn #163 “Of eternal love begotten”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fpsj25M1QdI>

Benediction:

Lord, open our hearts to your love,
and make your home within us.
As you took upon you our nature,
grant that we may be partakers of the Divine.
Grant that we may ever rejoice in your presence,
King of kings and Lord of lords.

The Father, who has shown his love for us, be with us.
The Son, who has come to be among us, be with us.
The Spirit, who fills the whole world, be with us.
The Holy Three be within and without us,
now and evermore.
Amen.¹

¹ David Adam, *The Rhythm of Life*, 55.