

Advent 2: Silence and a Song

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Throughout my childhood and my teens I was obsessed with musicals. I knew them all, I was in a few, and had their songs on constant repeat. The Sound of Music. Annie. Grease. West Side Story. The Phantom of the Opera. Joseph and his Technicolour Dreamcoat. Les Mis. Rent.

Last week I bought my family unbearably expensive tickets to the upcoming Melbourne production of Hamilton. In truth, my musical theatre phase is not over.

While some people find it strange or distracting that the plot and the narrative are interrupted every few minutes, so the characters can break into song, I find it completely plausible and delightful. Instead of ploughing headlong through the experiences of life without taking a breath, musicals invite us to stop and reflect upon the moment; upon what the characters are thinking and feeling. A broken heart? Let me sing about it. Embarking on a new adventure? Here's a song about it. Looking back on the joys and disappointments of life? What better way than via a song.

Perhaps it is this inclination that explains some of my great fondness for the opening chapters of Luke's gospel. In the first two chapters of Luke, everyone gets a song. An angel appears to Mary, and she responds with a song. In the liturgy of the church we call her song The Magnificat.

Jesus is born and the sky is filled with angels, and they share their vision of peace and goodwill by forming a choir and singing: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth." We call that song the Gloria.

When Jesus is presented in the temple by his parents, the old priest Simeon holds the baby in his arms and sings a song. We call it the Nunc Dimittis.

And back in chapter 1, when John the Baptist is born to unlikely elderly parents Zechariah and Elizabeth, his father Zechariah breaks into song. In the liturgy of the church we call it the Benedictus and it was one of our readings today.

It begins: Blessed be the Lord God or, in Latin, Benedictus.

It concludes with what I consider some of the most beautiful verses of the gospels: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

As is the case for all the magnificent arias from musical theatre or opera, the song is an object of beauty on its own. It can be sung or read and appreciated just as it is: as an affirmation of faith, a proclamation of the good news, an ode to hope – that in the midst of darkness a light will come, the dawn will break. That even when the shadow of death hangs over us, it remains possible that our feet will be guided into the way of peace."

But songs that are sung as part of a story are most profoundly understood only by entering into the context in which they are sung.

And today I want to see if we can capture more of the beauty of this song, and understand more of the audacious faith that it proclaims, by taking some time to remind ourselves of the context in which it is sung. So here is a reminder of Zechariah's story.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are introduced as a devout, priestly couple. They were both from lines of priests.

Perhaps in this day and age they would both do the work of ministry, but in their time and place it was Zechariah who performed the priestly tasks. Elizabeth's job was to produce priestly offspring, and she had not. The biblical text describes her as barren, a horrendous world that implies lifelessness, with a good dose of blame and disgrace attached. There was no concept of the possibility of male infertility.

Elizabeth was barren and we're told she was beyond the age of child bearing.

In the story of the people of Israel, having children was not primarily about the nuclear family or personal circumstances, but about God's blessing and the survival of the Jewish people, and the ability to perpetuate the covenant God had with these chosen people.

Infertility was considered fair and reasonable grounds for a man to divorce his wife – something that rarely comes up today when people speak on the sanctity of biblical marriage.

All of this tends to sound very antiquated to our modern ears, except that I know that for those of you, and others, who for whatever reason have not had children yourselves, times have not necessarily changed as much as we may have hoped. It remains a painful experience of grief for many people – and one that is rarely acknowledged. So that even bible passages like this one can raise all sorts of sadness and anger. And I acknowledge that today. You are not invisible to us.

Well, Zechariah didn't divorce Elizabeth. They were living together in their older years, faithful to each other, and faithfully serving God even though it may well have seemed that God had not been faithful to them.

Now Zechariah was a priest.

The priests were divided into 24 groups or sections, and each section served twice a year in the temple in Jerusalem – for one week at a time. Which sounds like favourable work life balance really.

From each group one priest was selected to enter the sanctuary to offer the incense. This was an honour the typically came once in a lifetime, if at all.

As an old man Zechariah had his opportunity. The pinnacle of his priestly career.

The priest would enter the sanctuary alone. A sacrifice would be offered on the altar, the incense would be lit and would waft up to the heavens representing the prayers of the people who were gathered in prayer outside the sanctuary. The people remained outside waiting for the priest to come out and offer them a blessing from God. The priest would send the people's prayers up to God. The priest would then receive God's blessing and share it with the people.

This was the priestly role. To be the connection between God and God's people. On the day Zechariah held the responsibility for bringing God and the people together. His most sacred task as a priest, he is interrupted. By an angel. And Zechariah is not thrilled about it. In fact we are told he was terrified, and that fear overwhelmed him. Which seems reasonable.

The angel's first words, "do not be afraid." Which is a little late for Zechariah.

Zechariah is told that his prayer is to be answered. That his elderly wife Elizabeth will have a son, that they will call him John, and that he will be strange and odd but not to worry, he will be great in the sight of the Lord and will be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Zechariah, a wise man who has experienced some life and some disappointment, is skeptical. He questions the angel, and points out that Elizabeth is old. And after questioning the angel he becomes mute. Unable to speak. He is suddenly without words. And he cannot give the blessing to the people. He cannot fulfil his role as a priest. The timing is appalling.

Preachers and commentators and writers have some harsh words for Zechariah. By questioning the announcement that he will have a child he is described by some as sinful, as faithless, as a nonbeliever, all for his questioning of something utterly unexpected, miraculous and unprecedented.

It's curious isn't it, how we expect so much more piety and so much less questioning from our biblical characters than ourselves. The harshness of the God they preach is unfamiliar to me. This God who punishes a man for a question. This God who gives with one hand – here you will miraculously have a son – while taking away with the other – but you will be disciplined by having your ability to speech wrenched away from you. This kind of God I do not know. And I wonder, could his loss of speech be a gift rather than a punishment?

What I do know is that Zechariah was resigned the reality that not only would he and Elizabeth not have children of their own, but that his priestly name, and priestly line, would stop with him. Zechariah's reality was full of endings, of last things. The possibilities were closing down, shutting off.

IN the gendered language of the ancient text it is Elizabeth who is described as barren. But we quickly learn, and many of us already know, that there are many ways to be barren.

Zechariah is living a faithful life but no longer expects anything else.

Many of us have been there.

His eyes have lowered to the ground. There are no longer dreams growing in his heart.

But if there are many ways to be barren then there are also many ways to be fertile.

Zechariah is given his own version of a pregnancy. 9 months of silence in which something new might grow. No opportunity to narrate his situation with the same old words.

What a gift a break from noise and words can be.

Worthy things have always taken time to grow: babies, trees, vocations, genuine and new hopes.

9 months later John is born. The boy and the man we know as John the Baptist. The one who will prepare the way for Jesus. We hear parts of his story all through Advent.

And after John's birth, Zechariah, the priest who was rendered speechless upon hearing the news he would be a father, miraculously has words again.

This is the context in which his song is sung. The reading that we heard, which begins Blessed be the Lord and ends with that declaration of the dawn breaking for those in darkness – these are words that Zechariah utters when his ability to speak returns.

How extraordinary and magnificent.

How different this song sounds when we imagine the 9 months of terrifying silence that preceded them.

Zechariah's lost the ability to speak and when it returned, what emerged was this: That the tender mercy of God is like the dawn that breaks a long darkness, like the song that breaks a long silence, and it gives light to those who have been sitting in dark places and life to those walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

Wait for God, friends, when you are in darkness.

Wait upon God, when you are walking through the harshest and deepest valleys.

Expect God, when the things you hoped would grow will not, and when life has not produced what you wished it would.

Keep silence if your words do not speak of life and wait.

We are an Advent people, a people who dare to hope and to pray in the darkness.

Who dare to look at the world in all its beauty and its brokenness and still pray for the light to come.

Hope and pray, Advent church.

For we are those who join with Mary and with Zechariah and with Elizabeth, and hold faith that God breaks into this world and into our lives in surprising ways and at unexpected moments.

Let that amaze you. Let it render you speechless.

And then, when the dawn breaks, join Zechariah and sing heartfelt songs about the tender mercy of God, who brings light into the darkness.

Amen.