

# Dan Phillips: The Tale of Zechariah

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## The Tale of Zechariah

In our lectionary today, we heard a reading from Luke that was the 'Song of Zechariah'. (Do not worry: this is not another [music sermon](#).) Now Zechariah sang this song at the end of a story, and that story is the one I want to explore today.

It begins in the time of King Herod. There was a good priest named Zechariah who had a wife named Elizabeth. They were righteous people, elderly, and sad, for they had no children. One day, it came his turn to enter into the Temple and burn incense as part of the worship. He did this while the worshipping community waited in the outer court praying. He was a good man living a good life, waiting on God.

While Zechariah was in the inner court, a strange thing happened: an angel visited him. Even though this happens a lot in the book of Luke, Zechariah was startled and afraid. So the angel said, as they must get tired of saying, 'Do not be afraid. I have come to tell you something good, something that is an answer to your prayers! Your wife is going to have a child. You will name him John. He will make you happy, and many others too will rejoice at his birth. Because he is to be dedicated to God, he must never drink alcohol. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, right from his birth. And his task will be to prepare the people of God for the arrival of the Messiah.'

I am sure Zechariah thought many things while listening to the Angel. He probably thought that the Angel had the wrong man. He and Elizabeth were too old to be having children. If it was they, then God had sure taken her time answering this prayer! Maybe, thought Zechariah, I should make sure this angel has his story straight. Therefore, Zechariah asked the angel for a sign. How, said Zechariah, will I know this is going to happen?

Now the angel proceeded to prove that even angels could get angry. I am Gabriel, the angel answered. I spend time at the throne of the Almighty Creator, and you ask me to prove what I am saying. I was sent all the way here to tell you this good news, and you doubt me! I will give you a sign alright; I will fix you. Here is your sign: you will not be able to talk until all this has happened.' Then Gabriel left, probably in bright red huff.

Now this part of the story puzzles me. Many others in Luke are given signs, most without even asking. Why was Gabriel so mad at Zechariah? I mean, I would certainly have asked for a sign, checked to see if Gabriel meant my wife and me. So, why the anger? I was in a conversation in the last few months where the concept of anger was discussed. We talked about whether anger could be good anger, or whether it was always a bad thing. Being Seekers, we certainly did not come to a consensus, but we did talk about 'righteous anger' and its uses. Maybe that was the case here. I do not really understand this. Nevertheless, it makes a great story, as we shall see.

The other question here is why Zechariah was struck dumb. Gabriel could have done many other things to Zechariah. However, I see the silence as an essential part of this story. For one theme of this story is language: words, names, labels, etc. Zechariah is rendered unable to use language, to communicate. He is forced to spend nine months and more thinking about what he should have said to Gabriel, how he should have responded to God's message. I work with this issue

on a regular basis. I really wish that I could learn to wait before I respond, to think before I talk. However, after the time is up, Zechariah comes out with a great prophecy. This says a lot about the need for a fallow time before we create. We often need to be quiet, to wait, as we get ready to respond to God in our lives. Maybe what we interpret as punishment was just a necessary part of Zechariah's spiritual journey.

The people of the worshipping community were patiently waiting for Zechariah to return and get on with the service. However, when he finally came out, he could not talk. While, at times, I have wanted to see a speaker in a church service struck dumb, this must have been quite a shock. Moreover, since Zechariah had been able to speak before and never learned sign language, he was not able to explain fully what had happened. The community did realize that he had a vision of some sort, but what the details were, they could not understand. Therefore, they went away puzzled, and sorry for silent Zechariah. After his time of Temple service was up, Zechariah went home. In addition, his wife Elizabeth did get pregnant. She was very happy, and thanked God, but Zechariah had nothing to say about all this!

Now, in another of those amazing coincidences in Luke, Elizabeth, wife of Zechariah, was a relative of Mary's. You remember Mary, a woman who also had a visit from Gabriel. Well, after Gabriel's visit to her, she goes to visit her kinfolk Elizabeth and Zechariah. I guess she wanted to swap pregnancy stories with Liz. At any rate, she stayed and visited for three months, composing her own song during that time. Her song is called the **magnificat**, and is one of the best-known songs in the Bible.

After nine months, Elizabeth gave birth to a son. Everyone was happy, but poor Zechariah could not speak. On the eighth day after the child's birth, at the circumcision, they were getting ready to name the child. The extended family expected him to be called Zechariah, Jr., but Elizabeth had another

idea. He should be named John, she said. However, said all the aunts and uncles, parents and grandparents, there is nobody in our family with that name! Why would you want to call him that? She insisted, however. Finally, unable to change her mind, they decided to go to poor Zechariah and ask him. Maybe he could talk some sense into his wife, or maybe 'talk' was not the right word. Whatever, they would ask him what name the baby would be given.

Zechariah had been waiting for this since the angel came. He could, he supposed, call this child Zechariah Jr. just to spite that haughty angel. However, it had been God's command, and surely, she knew best. So he asked for paper, to make sure everyone understood him, and he wrote down the name **John**, which some scholars say means 'Grace of God'. The family might have argued further, but at this very moment, Zechariah got his voice back. As he began praising God, everyone began asking what kind of a child this was going to be, with such parents!

Now why was it so important that John be called John? To misquote Shakespeare, a prophet by any other name could preach just as well. Or, could he? Maybe hearing about what happened to his father was an important part of John's call. Maybe God was just determined that John be called 'Grace of God'. It does appear that God, through Gabriel, is saying that names and words are very important.

In Sunday School, the seniors have been studying the Lord of the Rings. Tolkien began this great work of fiction by inventing a new language. Before he finished it, he had invented parts of three different languages. His story comes from a love of language. That is part of what makes it so wonderful.

For myself, I love working with words, playing with how we express ideas. It is so clear to me that we are far less precise in language than we think we are. Nevertheless, that

is not bad, as the ambiguity of language is a wonderful thing. It is the imprecision of language that gives us poetry, and what a gift.

I would like to take time to illustrate how language can turn on us; it can teach us things. [Read poem: The Body Is Stupid]. When I began to write this poem, I really thought the body was stupid, and was trying to say how superior the mind was to the body. By the end of the poem, I had changed my mind, as you can tell.

It is the imprecision of language, the looseness of it, that leads me to raise an issue in this community of Seekers. In the last six months, I have been surprised several times at how we corporately use language. On one occasion when I was liturgist, I said that so-and-so would be 'speaking' this morning. I was asked later if 'speaking' was the official term. Why did I not say 'preaching'? The person who asked felt that 'preaching' was more significant than just 'speaking'. They felt that I, in saying 'speaking', had maybe downgraded the person providing the word. This really surprised me, as I have a real prejudice against 'preaching'. I have been 'preached to' many times in my life, and seldom has it been a positive experience. Most 'preachers' I have heard I do not want to hear again. Contrasting that, I have generally enjoyed people who 'spoke', whether individually or as part of a worshipping community. To me, 'preaching' is intrusive, demanding, narrow, while 'speaking' is supportive, reasoned, open.

All of this to say, "This is my understanding of the word." I am certainly not saying that we should only use the word 'speaking' for those who bring us the word. I recognize that this is my own prejudice, and I needed to listen to that other person to understand how narrow I was being in my use of these terms. Nevertheless, I must confess that while I still do not like the word 'preaching' I would never deny its use to someone else.

I understood what they were saying when they used 'preaching' and I even understood that its meaning to them was more positive than its meaning to me. We need to learn to hear what people are saying as well as how they are saying it. It is very discouraging to me that some in our community seem to want to censor certain words, to say that they should never be used. We need to learn to model good language rather than trying to ban language we do not approve of. Yes, we need to be careful how we say things, but we should not approach language as something that we stand guard over.

Last Tuesday evening I was surprised to see new words for some of the old carols, words used to avoid saying King or Lord, or to avoid using 'he' for God. This again dismayed me. Are we so sensitive to theology that we must make these kinds of changes? Come on, we are Seekers! Our theology is not that precise! I ask you to join with me in the ongoing conversation about Seeker's language.

Another facet of this is that there are some who feel that, at some time in the past, Seekers agreed not to use certain language. For those of us who arrived after those conversations, I ask that we revisit them.

So, we return to Zechariah's song. He sang of the past works of God to preserve and protect Israel, and of the promises of God for Israel's eventual redemption. Then he begins to sing about all the John will do: he will prepare the way for Jesus, he will prepare the people, he will shine on those living in darkness and he will guide their feet unto the path of peace. Zechariah revived old themes in a new context, surely a challenge for us. Let us do the same, finding new words and contexts for old themes, working with our speech limitations to craft a new song to our God.