

Preparing for Christmas in Silence
Malachi 3:1-5a, 4:5-6 Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

It's Christmas time and the season for all those Christmas carols. As familiar as we are with the songs of Christmas, there are four songs recorded in the Bible surrounding the birth of Jesus that aren't sung much anymore. (1) We all remember the angels singing a song to the shepherds (we know part of the song): "Glory to God on the highest, and on earth peace and goodwill towards men." (2) In Luke 1:46-55, Mary sang a song to God after she had time to get over the shocking news that she was going to be the mother of the Savior. We know this song as the "Magnificat." (3) In Luke 2:28-32, Simeon had a song when Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple. (4) Then there's Zechariah's song – in our scripture this morning. Zechariah was an elderly priest who sang after being visited by an angel. These four songs are not like a Broadway musical – these people didn't suddenly burst into chorus. But the ancient church captured their words and created songs as canticles or choruses.

For some background to our scripture this morning, let's begin by reaching back in history to about four centuries before the birth of Christ. The Old Testament ends with the book of the prophet Malachi.

Read Malachi 3:1-5a, 4:5-6:

Just like that, the Old Testament comes to a close. It's confusing, cryptic, disturbing. It's not really the way you want to end a book – unless you are planning to write a sequel!

Remember, Elijah had died hundreds of years before the time of Malachi and was probably the most famous of the Old Testament prophets. Elijah was relentless in calling God's people to repent – to turn away from their sin and toward the one true God. So, is the book of Malachi talking about reincarnation? Many in Jesus' day believed that this Scripture passage from Malachi actually did imply that Elijah would come back from the

dead. So, if we are just reading the Old Testament, we are left hanging, wondering, and waiting – like the Jews of Jesus time.

After the prophet Malachi wrote these words, there were no more prophets and no more written revelations from God for 400 years. That's how much time elapsed between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. Four hundred years. That's longer than then the United States has been a country; around the time of Shakespeare and Galileo. As long as the time of Henry Hudson exploring the bay to be named after him and being set adrift by mutineers never to be seen again...The Church of the Brethren is only 314 years old.

400 years...of silence. We don't really like silence, do we? How many of you have ever been in a small group praying, and there's 30 seconds of silence? It feels like an eternity. Or, have you ever prayed and prayed and prayed about a struggle in your life and as best as you could tell, God was silent? I think most of us have experienced that, and at times it seemed like we would never hear from God. Right? But for God to be silent for 400 years? What was that about? Generation after generation went by without a fresh word from God. True, Israel had the law of Moses and the words of the prophets, but actually only a few Israelites were dedicated/were committed to understanding those words and promises of God...only a few were willing to wait their entire lives, if necessary, to hear from God.

God was silent for 400 years – at least that is how we understand it. Right? I think it is helpful to try and envision things from God's perspective...but that doesn't mean he had stopped working on behalf of humankind. The apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 4:4-5, "...when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship". God acted – at least we could see that he acted – "when the set time had fully come" – when

everything was ready and prepared, he acted. For four hundred years, God was silently, but actively, preparing the world stage for the coming of the Savior.

So, how was God preparing the world? Well, let's consider this example; from 356-323BC, God brought to power a man known as Alexander the Great. As Alexander took his army around the Mediterranean region, he set up cities and libraries for the sole purpose of spreading the Greek culture and language. It was the time of Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato. So, by the time Rome came to power, Greek was the language of both commerce and education. Since Greek was so common a language, this influence led to the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, what scholars today call the Septuagint (written in Egypt – or at least requested by the Egyptian king to be written by Jewish scholars). So, why is this translation so important? For one thing, it enabled gentiles to read and become acquainted with the principles of Judaism. Later, when the biographies of Jesus (the Gospels) and letters of instruction for the early churches were written, they were written in Greek. While Alexander the Great believed he was on a divine mission spreading Greek culture and language – and while he truly was...little did he know the leading was from the one true God that he personally did not know. In the silence, God was preparing for Christmas.

Here's another example of God preparing the world. When Rome came to power, one of their lasting legacies was a system of roads going to every part of the Empire. Hence the saying, "All roads led to Rome." Along with this unified Empire of peace (Pax Romana) and ease of travel came an unprecedented freedom to move from one Roman province to another – so critical to the spread of Christianity...In the silence, God was preparing for Christmas.

It's amazing what a change of perspective can bring! To the Jewish nation, it looked like God had abandoned them. But we can see from our perspective that God was very much

at work preparing the world, setting the stage, for his greatest work – the coming of his Son.

Let's move ahead to our key text, Luke 1:5-25. Finally, after 400 years of apparent silence, when everything was ready, God spoke again through an angel (The word angel means messenger).

Read Luke 1:5-25

When the angel Gabriel spoke, he picked up right where Malachi left off. Zechariah and his wife were going to have a baby – John – and the baby was the very one that Malachi promised would come – a powerful, influential prophet who would be like Elijah.

In fact, if you read further in the story about John as a man, he even dressed like Elijah – with a camel hair coat and a leather belt around his waist. Like Elijah, he called people to repentance; he called people back to God. Like Elijah, he didn't mince words, calling the religious leaders of his day, "a brood of vipers" ...As a priest, Zachariah was probably one of the few people left in that day who understood the Old Testament Scriptures well enough to make the connection between John and Elijah.

Despite Zechariah's awareness that God was at work, the news that he and his wife were going to have a baby at their age was pretty hard to believe...As some would say today, Zechariah had one foot in the grave and another on a banana peel.

We really can't blame Zechariah for asking in verse 8, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." In response to Zechariah, the angel said, "And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

Was Zechariah being punished? That doesn't seem fair, does it? Well, I'm not sure the silencing of Zechariah was all about punishment. I believe that in the silence, God was preparing Zechariah for Christmas.

You see, during the time when he couldn't speak, Zechariah must have poured through the Scriptures, trying to understand what was happening. He must have spent long hours in prayer trying to understand what the angel had said, and what the role of his son would be...Why name him John?...Well, the name means "gift from God," so that was pretty clear.

John would obviously be the one Malachi had predicted, but was that all – just another prophet, another prophet to be mostly ignored like all the rest? No, the more Zachariah was silent, the more he thought about the last thing the angel said, "And he will...make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Hum... the Lord...The Lord...was the angel talking about the Messiah; the Chosen One; the Savior?

At some point, it all came into focus for Zechariah. In silence, God prepared him to understand a bigger picture than just a miraculous birth to an elderly couple.

Read Luke 1:57-80:

Zechariah sang , but it wasn't a lullaby. It was a song of faith. Zechariah sang, not about his own son, but about another baby who would soon be born to a distant relative of his wife. It's not until verse 76 that he addresses his own son, and the role he would play in this event we call Christmas. Little baby John would grow up to be a herald, to prepare people for the coming King. In the silence, God had prepared Zechariah to understand a bigger picture than just a miraculous birth.

After 400 years without a prophet, people had to be awakened from their spiritual slumber. They had to hear the old, old stories. They had to remember the promises of

God. They had to become aware of their sin and the barrier that is to God. Through John's life work and eventual death, God served notice that his eternal plan for the redemption of people was finally at hand.

This was the first song of the first Christmas. And the lesson for us is this: Even in apparent silence, God is preparing you and me for Christmas. He is not preparing us for the holiday of Christmas, but for the reality of Christmas: "God with us."

When you find your self in silence, it helps to read of others who have gone before you. It helps to remember that although God did not make himself evident for four hundred years, he was at work the whole time preparing the way.

God will redeem the silence in your life. Whether you have been crying out for the salvation of someone you love; or the restoration of health for someone else or yourself; for an end to the financial hardship you have been under; for the stress and mental strain of life to ease up...God is still working, even when you cannot see evidence of it.

This is the essence of faith according to Hebrews 11:1, "faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." This is Christmas, in spite of the silence, sing a song of faith - a song like Zechariah's. Amen.

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