

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 20, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 113; Luke 1: 5-25; 57-80

"Well, Shut My Mouth"

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

What do you do when something remarkable happens to you? What do you do when the phone call comes announcing the birth of a healthy grandchild? What do you do when the doctor says, "There's no sign of cancer?" What is your response when what seemed impossible becomes real? You got the job you worked so hard to get . . . you hear the "I love you" that you've so longed to hear . . . you got up and didn't feel any pain . . . You get an unexpected snow day off from school . . . You receive the word that your son or daughter has returned safely from deployment in the Middle East? What do you do? How do you respond?

Some might cry. Others whoop or do an end-zone victory dance. Some might grab someone to hug or twirl. Maybe you stand frozen to the spot, afraid to believe. That was Zechariah's first response. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, both descendants of the priestly line of Aaron, had long prayed for children but had none. Now they were beyond the child-bearing years. Perhaps they had given up on that dream but they had not given up on God. Zechariah's division of priests was on duty at the Temple in Jerusalem. On this particular day, Zechariah was chosen by lot to be the priest to offer incense in the Holy Place during a service of prayer. It was a great honor that a priest could only do once in his life time. As presiding priest he would be in an area of the Temple only priests could enter. People would be gathered in prayer in the Temple. Zechariah was to reverently oversee the incense whose smoke carried the prayers of the people to God. I'm sure realizing the solemnity and responsibility of this rare moment, the selected priest would not do a dance or exclaim, in good southern tradition, "Well, shut my mouth" when he learned of his good fortune. Little did Zechariah know that there was even a great surprise awaiting him.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah in the isolation of that sacred Holy Place. The angel brought the astounding news that he and Elizabeth would indeed have a son they were to name John. This son would bring them and many great joy. From the start this son would be filled with the Holy Spirit and must follow a special way of life so that he would be prepared to turn many people back toward the Lord God. Pushing his fear aside, Zechariah asks the angel for a sign that such an unbelievable birth of a son would happen to elders like he and his wife. Zechariah's initial response to the great news was disbelief. Whether that disbelief was of the "too good to be true" variety or simply a biological bafflement, the angel didn't take too kindly to his questioning God's good news. The angel granted Zechariah's request for a sign. Zechariah was made mute until his son was born and named. Definitely one of those "be careful what you ask for" Bible moments. When he came out to the people in the Temple, it was very clear that Zechariah had an unexpected encounter with God. When his week of service at the Temple ended, he went home to Elizabeth and John was conceived. Zechariah would have nine months to silently consider all God had accomplished and wonder about what God was up to.

When John was born the entire town rejoiced with his parents. When it was time to circumcise and name the child, they dismissed Elizabeth's insistence that he be named

John. The boy should have his father's name, they thought and turned to Zechariah to get confirmation. When the old priest wrote, "His name is John," his tongue, mouth, vocal chords were freed. What was Zechariah's response to the impossible this time? He broke out praising God. Then Zechariah broke out in song, a prophecy later entitled the "Benedictus." Nine months of silent contemplation, frustration, jubilation erupted in a song that recounted the faithfulness of God in the history of Israel and announced that God was about to reveal the fulfillment of God's promises of salvation. What are the hallmarks of God's promised redemption? It wasn't the military conquest of enemy Romans. It wasn't the expulsion of people of other faiths. It wasn't becoming the new "haves" on the backs of "have nots." Instead, Zechariah sings of forgiveness of sins, deep compassion, tender mercies and ways of peace — the very qualities and realities that Jesus would announce, live and die to make known to us. And even though such things as everyone having enough and world peace seemed as impossible in Zechariah's time as it seems in ours, Zechariah belted out his song anyway and especially because our Lord promised "the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" and God's faithfulness is more powerful than our doubts or imaginations.

I'm back to where I began. How do you respond to the good news? How do you respond to the good news of Jesus, whose birth we soon celebrate and whose life showed us the heart of God? How do we respond to God's promise that the Lord's love and light will be victorious over hatred and darkness which was confirmed at Jesus' resurrection? Hundreds of thousands of people this weekend paid to see the force of good kick the butt of the Dark side once again in "Star Wars: the Force Awakens." Did you see all the excitement among people of all ages, costumed and in line to see the latest installment of Good against Evil? No doubt people cheered in the theater and then spread the word. In addition to fun characters and good effects, it's all about light prevailing over darkness and good winning over evil — Which sounds remarkably like the gospel. What might happen if we responded to the birth of Jesus and the death and resurrection of Jesus with the same enthusiasm as Star Wars fans? What would it be like if we who find our hope and being in Jesus would show as much excitement about God and our gatherings as was shown for a movie premier? What might happen if instead of Jedi warriors battling with lasers, we thought of ourselves as those who lifted Jesus' weapons of forgiveness, mercy and peace? This comparison may sound bizarre, but is it? Who is attracting the larger crowds? Should it be a fantasy film that captures our deep desire for good's victory or a Lord who IS the "Force" with the power and desire to save all people, all creation?

Please don't hear this as a rail against Star Wars or any other beloved franchise. That isn't my point at all. What is our response to good news? How do we show our excitement? In usual circumstances, I squeal with delight and have an burst of energetic dance. Then I want to tell someone — a complete stranger if I can't find someone I know. And then I find myself humming as I go about doing ordinary things. I find myself greeting people and extending courtesies with extra enthusiasm. There's an energy released with good news. How do we respond to the best news of all — a Savior, born to bring God's love and ways among us? In the gospel of Luke, everyone erupts into song. Mary, Zechariah, the angels and Simeon all find the wonder of God's presence, promises and power making their feet tap and a song of good news bursting out of them, on key or off. What about us?

There's a story about the 20th century violinist, Fritz Kreisler who discovered an exquisite violin on one of his concert tours but was unable to buy it. Later, having raised enough money, he returned to the seller to buy the beautiful instrument but found it had been sold to a collector. Kreisler made his way to the new owner's home and offered to buy the violin. The rare instrument was proudly displayed behind a sealed and solid glass case. The collector said it had become his prized possession and it was not for sale.

Disappointed, Kreisler was about to leave but asked if he might play the instrument once more before it was forever consigned to silence. Permission granted, the great virtuoso released the violin from its fancy tomb and filled the room with heart-moving, beautiful music. The collector was visibly moved. "Take it," he told Kreisler, "I have no right to keep it to myself. The world needs to hear it."¹

The world needs to hear and experience the forgiveness, mercy and peace of our Lord. We have a song to sing. We have good news to share. It's not meant to be a relic of the past or hidden in our churches. The world needs to know the Lord whom we celebrate each Sunday. It's time to up the volume and joy of our faith. How can we keep from singing of God's love and presence? It's a song that keeps us going in good times and bad. It's a song that holds, heals and frees us for life with meaning and passion. What might it look like if all of us who love Jesus would have that Star-Wars-like excitement about our worship, churches and our service? Wow! Can you imagine? What's keeping us from singing for all the world to hear? Amen.

Pastor Linda M Alessandri 12/19/15

ENDNOTE

1. Borrowed from a sermon, "Prison Break" by Leonard Sweet [Collected Sermons](#) ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc 2008 0-000-1415 (Could not find factual substantiation for the story)