

the QUIET collection



for Christmas

Day 5: Clarity

Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed his great mercy toward her. And they were rejoicing with her. And it happened that on the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child and they were going to call him Zacharias after his father. But his mother answered and said, “No, indeed, but he shall be called John.” And they said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who is called by that name.” And they made signs to his father as to what he wanted him called. And he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows, his name is John. And they were all astonished. And at once, his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he began to speak in praise of God. Fear came on all those living around them. And all these matters were being talked about in all the hill country of Judea. All who heard them kept them in mind saying, “What then will this child turn out to be? For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him.” – Luke 1:57-66

This is the word of the Lord. As much as we might like to deny it, our memory of holidays past may not always line up to the truth. If we are a glass half full sentimentalist, we may remember only the cookie baking and the cozy fires with our laughing family and our thoughtful winter walks. If we're glass half empty pessimists, we may tend to remember the long lines, the forced dinner table conversations with extended family, and the bitter cold. Here, in this account of the circumcision of Elizabeth and Zacharias' only son, it might be easy to see only the joy of Zacharias as he finally gets his voice back. But the author Luke is keen to include this strange encounter with Elizabeth's neighbors and relatives before Zacharias' prophecy.

They are insisting this elderly couple, descendants from Aaron, take action in line with the culture of the day. The baby should be named after his father. They had all the good reasons why, not the least of which being the miracle of his birth in the first place. Didn't Zacharias deserve to have his only miracle son bear the honor of his name? They certainly thought so, and they didn't hesitate to say it. But Elizabeth objected, asserting his name should be called John. Well, this was not acceptable to the family. They pushed back, telling her all the reasons she was wrong, stating how ridiculous it would be to do so. I can't say for sure, but I would imagine it might've been tempting for her to doubt herself in that moment, to retreat or reconsider, or at least to keep her conviction quiet. But this was not an option.

This baby needed a name. And this whole ceremony was already atypical of the times. Historically and culturally, the father would have had much more of a leading role in the ceremony, but this time that wasn't possible because the baby's father, though present, was still unable to speak. In fact, he'd been quiet for Elizabeth's entire pregnancy, a result of his disbelief when the angel Gabriel came to him and told him he would have a son and his insistence that he be given a sign. Well, a sign, he was given and he was mute from there on out. And now here they were with the promised son wiggling among them without an acceptable name. Despite Elizabeth's insistence that his name be called John, the family turns to Zacharias and begins to gesture to him implying that perhaps he hadn't only lost his ability to speak, but also his ability to hear. They wanted him to break the tie. What should they call the baby? Shouldn't he follow in his father's footsteps and be so named?

To the shock of everyone present, Zacharias stands by his wife, affirming they should call his name, John, and they were all astonished. Immediately, Zacharias was able to speak again. It was against all odds that Elizabeth became pregnant, bore, and birthed a son. And it was against all cultural implications that they listened to the angel Gabriel instead of the tradition of the day. And they chose to give him the name, John. It's easy for us reading from the side of history to forget how counter-cultural this truly was. It's easy for us to misunderstand what a risk this would seem like to the bystanders, to the family and the friends, what a risk it might feel like for Elizabeth and Zacharias, but if they felt nervous about this move, it didn't show, for the words Zacharias spoke when he first received his voice again, he spoke about his son.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the most high, for you will go on before the Lord to prepare his ways to give to his people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the sunrise from on high will visit us to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death to guide our feet into the way of peace. What feels risky for you as you prepare to face your own friends and relatives this season? Have you grown beyond any cultural norms that might take your people by surprise? What form is the life of God taking in you today? Take a moment to be still, to listen to the truth you know is true and to hold on to the clarity only Holy Spirit brings and may God guide your feet into the way of peace. Amen.