We are so familiar with Mary’s encounter with Gabriel that we can almost recite it for ourselves. “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you…you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” Mary responds, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” and Gabriel seems to happily explain how the Holy Spirit will be at work.

Months prior Gabriel visited a priest named Zechariah while he was alone in the sanctuary. Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, desperately wanted to have children, but since both were getting on in years, they felt that dream had died. But Gabriel comes bringing hope and new life to their dream. Gabriel shares that their prayer has been heard and that Elizabeth will bear a son whom they will name John.

Zechariah responds, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” Instead of happily explaining how the Holy Spirit will work, Gabriel replies, “because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

Imagine not being able to speak for months. Zechariah has lived a full life as a priest where his voice has been such an important part of his ministry, and his voice is suddenly gone. He is now silent. Zechariah must be wondering how he will lead worship? How will he communicate with those he cares for? How will he lift his voice in praise?

Many perceive Zechariah’s silence as a punishment, but could his silence instead be a gift?

Luke doesn’t share much about what Zechariah experiences during those months of silence, but we can assume he has lots of time for reflection and prayer.
When I am unable to use my voice, it can provide the gift of being more aware of my senses such as sight and hearing. I wonder what new things Zechariah sees when he would normally be forming his response to another? And I wonder what new gifts of creation he hears when he isn’t focused on speaking?

For many years, Zechariah has been focused on what he was doing or not doing, on what he had or didn’t have. In more situations than I care to admit, I find myself focused on what I am doing or not doing, on what I have or don’t have, and on what burdens I am carrying or not carrying, rather than focusing on what God is doing.

Advent invites us to pause and reflect on how God is at work in our lives and in the world. While our culture is pressuring us to embrace the busyness of the Christmas season as our calendar year comes to an end, God is inviting us to begin the Christian year anticipating the coming of Christ, the light of the world, Emmanuel - God with us - who is the way of peace.

During this season, our minds are filled with things we need and often want to do whether it be at home or at work, for family or for friends. It is easy to let those thoughts, pressures, and burdens consume our living, but that is not the gift of the season. Advent is the doorway to deeper union with the Divine through silence and stillness. Advent invites us to reframe our living and bring depth and connection through all those things that fill our living.

Many of us come to this season and this service bearing grief or knowing and loving someone who is bearing grief. This season can be difficult for those who grieve. By its nature, the season calls to mind people and situations and things that once were and are no more.

The empty place at the table.

The ruptured relationship.

The place you once lived.

The lost job.

Diminished health.
The depression and anxiety that remain, no matter how many lights you put on the tree.

Grief can feel like a darkness, an isolation, and a lot of work. Mostly, it can feel like it is ours alone, that no one else can understand it, or bear it, but you.

This service, and the words of Zechariah, invite us to move beyond isolation into the reality of God at work. It is an invitation to lay down not the grief itself, but the perception of being alone in it. Zechariah speaks from a place of grief himself, both for himself and for his people. His song is itself a longing to be rescued from enemies and redeemed from fear.

Now, freshly out of his silence, he sings of the tender mercy of God as a dawn that breaks from on high and gives light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

He sings, of course, ahead of time. None of the things he sings about have yet to happen. Yet his song speaks of a God who is acting, even now, to bring to pass that which God promises. The child named John is a sign that it is God, and God alone, who can bear not only our grief, but the grief of the world.

Zechariah cannot bear his grief alone. And what he has learned in his long silence is that he does not bear it alone, and neither do we.

Some of you come to a service like this with high expectations, just as I find myself entering Advent with high expectations. Advent brings the joy of new possibilities and the hope of deeper union with God, but it also brings the anxiety of wondering if I am doing enough.

How much time do I need to spend in silence each day? In addition to reading the wonderful Advent devotion the members of our congregation write, what do I want to read or what type of spiritual discipline do I want to add to during Advent? Am I creating enough space to listen for God speak?

Have you noticed my pronouns? “I, I, I.” I can fall into the illusion that I am the one in control and what I do or don’t do is what matters rather than focusing on how God is at work.
We each carry different burdens - burdens of our own, of those we love, and of our world - some of which we have been naming to God for many years while others for just a short time. We wonder if we are praying the right way. We wonder if we are pleasing God in our words and actions. We wonder if we are discerning God’s voice correctly or why God doesn’t seem to be speaking. We wonder if God is listening at all. We wonder…

*So much of this is about our need to know, to control ...*

*Mary Oliver, in a poem called “Praying,” speaks of “a silence in which another voice may speak.”*

*Zechariah is plunged into the terrifying gift of silence. It is terrifying because it strips him of control. He has sought to speak of what God can and cannot do, and now he is reduced to silence. It is a terrifying gift, however, because in the silence, he is witness to what God can do and is doing. It has made room for another voice to speak.*

*Among the burdens we bring this night is the burden of our own need to control, the burden of so much speaking and so little silence, so much talking and so little listening. We use our words to define ourselves over against others, to compare ourselves to others, to compete with others. All this talk saturates our media and our politics. We are bending under the great weight of trying to control.*

*Zechariah’s silence is an invitation to our own.*

All these things that we have named and many others that you are thinking don’t magically go away, but Advent does invite us to reframe them. Advent is a time to sit in silence, to name them before God, and to lift them into God’s light. We enter the silence filled with “I” pronouns, focused on ourselves and on what we are doing or not doing. If we accept the gift of silence in the midst of these thoughts, it can offer us a fresh perspective and a new outlook. The silence will not necessarily change the situation, but the silence can change us.

Silence can be scary for some. In a world filled with noise, silence can feel lonely and too quiet. I understand that because that is how I used to feel. It felt strange to be quiet, to sit in silence, and to not fill the silence with words spoken or
in my head. There was fear that I didn’t know how to start, and when I did try, there was fear that I wasn’t doing it right.

As I created more space for silence, I realized there was also fear of what might happen, of what I might discern God is saying to me. I assume I am normal to fear the unknown as I have heard that underlying fear of the unknown in countless pastoral conversations -fear of the unknown diagnosis, fear of the unknown future of a relationship, fear of not knowing if we are following God’s call, or fear of the unknown future in general.

Some may view Zechariah’s silence as punishment, but I view it as a gift. I have experienced the gift of silence in the last few years. Silence creates space to prepare our hearts and minds for the moment when we will break forth into singing our own blessing just as Zechariah did when his silence was lifted.

Zechariah receives and lives into this gift, this silence, for nine months. While he waits, something grows within him even as the baby grows in Elizabeth’s womb. Within Zechariah’s silence grows a benediction, a song of blessing. Each day, Zechariah sees evidence in Elizabeth’s changing shape of what God is doing, of previously unimagined possibilities, of newness; and within Zechariah swells a song that turns his eyes, and ours, away from what we can and cannot do, away from isolated grief, away from the prison of the ego - the “I” - away from the need to control and compare and compete, and his eyes, and ours, turn toward the One we were created to bless, the Lord God of Israel.

Zechariah gives birth to a prayer that blesses God, naming what God is doing – God is looking, redeeming, raising, showing, remembering, giving, and guiding. God is birthing a new day, dawn is breaking on all who are in darkness and shadows.

Zechariah gives birth to prayer. What prayer is growing within you in the gift of this silence, sacred, space? May you, may we all, accept the invitation to give voice to our longing, and be guided, each one, in the way of peace. Amen.