

Imagine...a peace that surpasses all understanding.

Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6

As often happens with our lectionary, we end up hearing one piece of a story without really understanding what happened prior. So we all did that nice responsive sung piece which was Zechariah song. But do you know who Zechariah was?

Zechariah was a priest. A minister, just like me, in a congregation. He was in a temple. And he was quite old; he had a wife named Elizabeth. And Elizabeth too was quite old. In fact, Elizabeth had tried to have children but was not able to. One day, an angel appeared to Zechariah. And when the angel appeared to Zechariah, the angel brought a message from God, because that's what the angels are: messengers from God. Gabriel informs Zechariah that in fact, he and Elizabeth would have a child. Now Zechariah was not only afraid that the angel was appearing in the first place, but then to hear that they were going to have a child at their age? He thought the angel was crazy. And so he said to the angel, "There is no possible way. This just can't happen." And the angel looked at him and went, "But it can. And it will." And it was in that moment that suddenly, Zechariah wasn't able to speak. Because he had challenged the angel, and because he had doubted the message from God, he was silenced. He was mute; he couldn't speak anymore. And so, he had been at the temple keeping the lights going at night. He came out the next morning, and people were wondering, "What's going on?" And he was kind of motioning to them, and they were like, "Why is Zechariah not talking to us?" It's because he couldn't.

Eventually – this went on for some time. He was mute for not one month, not two, but *exactly nine months* until Elizabeth had her child. And when Elizabeth had the child, when they got to the point when they were going to name the child, they were going to name him John. And people were like, "No, no, no, don't name him John." And Zechariah was waving at people trying to get their attention because he couldn't speak. And he asked for a tablet – that's what they had back then: this rock that they could write on with chalk – and so he wrote on with chalk and said, "His name is John." So that's what it was. And John, we find out later, is John the Baptist.

Now Elizabeth is also cousins with Mary. We know Mary ended up having the baby Jesus, right? Mary and Elizabeth both end up having children. One is John and one is Jesus and we will hear their stories later after Christmas. But did you know that John's name means, *God remembers*. John means *God's gift*. *God is gracious*.

So here we have a man who is a priest who should have been ready for the message that God had for him, but he wasn't. So my question for you today is: are *you* ready? Are you prepared to hear the message of God? To receive the message of God on Christmas Eve. We heard that we are to prepare the way for the Lord. All of us are called to prepare the way.

Now, for some of us, I don't know if any of you have ever played "The Silent Game"? Anybody ever had to play The Silent Game? Parents love this game. And as a child, in my family, we played it a lot, because my brother had what we would call verbal diarrhea; he just never stopped talking. He talked and talked and talked and talked. He talked so much that inevitably on our car rides, we would play the Silent Game. How long can you remain silent? I had no problem with this game; I would win every time. My brother would last 30 seconds, maybe two minutes maximum, and then he would start talking again.

But there's something about being silent. When we are silent, it allows us to hear things we wouldn't normally hear. When we are silent, we pay attention with our other senses. When we are silent, other people might see us in a different way, and then what we say might have more power and importance. Basically, I think God silenced Zechariah for one reason: to have Zechariah change his perspective. To change what he thought God could make possible.

So I wonder, what are the roadblocks that we put up as a society or as individuals for finding a sense of peace in this world? What are some of the ways we put up roadblocks that block God's message? It's very clear in the song that Zechariah sings at the end once he was able to get his voice back that true peace in our hearts and in the world will only come when we are right with God. When we have laid aside our own ambitions and passions and can turn them over to God. We have let go of our need to control what is happening in the world, and instead trusting in God to do that.

Jesus is often referred to in our Christmas carols as the "Prince of Peace". Jesus came on earth to bring us peace. And it's the kind of peace that Sally prayed about earlier. It's the kind of peace that isn't just about getting rid of violence in the world. This is the kind of peace that people can be healed. Where each of us will feel whole. It's the kind of peace that's going to allow a wolf to live with the lamb.

I don't know about you, but recently there's been a lot of videos on social media about some unusual pairings of animals. My favourite one is this lioness. Who typically would eat the dik-dik, which is like a little deer. And I've seen this happen many times when I was in Africa.

However, in this one picture, the lioness had lost her one child, and ended up adopting this little dik-dik and was licking it lovingly, protecting it from the other lions, who saw it as this juicy morsel. This happens when people change their perspective. When they don't assume that what has always been is the way it's going to be. God surprises us in so many different ways and sometimes we miss it when we are talking too much or are too focussed in our own little world.

So we really, in this week of peace, need to use our imaginations, because our creativity allows us to conceive millions of possibilities. We need to dream bigger than we usually do, and in order to be in right relationship with God and with one another, we often need to repent and, more importantly, forgive each other. True repentance means literally to change one's mind. To turn it around. To reorient ourselves. If we go back to the story of the warm fuzzies, we saw what happened when people got taken off the path. When the evil witch came and convinced them that there wouldn't be any more warm fuzzies. And all it took was for one person to have faith. One person to believe that we would never ever run out of love. God reminds us of this. That is why we gather together. This is how we support one another. We are called to recklessly give away love and care to one another. We are not to be stingy. We are not to laugh when the angel brings us these messages of good news.

So I hope that we will all just shift our thinking. Maybe if we talk too much, take some time to be silent. Maybe if we don't talk enough, share what's going on in our lives. We need each other in order for this world to be a place of peace. And it is only when we learn to forgive one another, work together, be true to our calling, that God's love can spread throughout this world. May you all find peace this week. May you all be a sign of peace this week to everyone you meet. Amen.