

## Advent 2 / “John the Baptist: The Path of Peace”

*Luke 1:57-67, 76-79*

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How do you respond to making the most important decisions in your life?—what career path to follow, what job to accept, who you will marry, whether to have children, move to a new city, province or country, or where to retire. One of our young adult children was recently discerning such life-decisions around career, calling, and work, and was asking all of those weighty questions that go along with making decisions that will determine the rest of your life. Is this job for me? Is this the city for me? Is this what I am meant to do? The weight of such choices can be agonizing.

Personally, I always wanted to keep my options open for as long as possible. I seemed to be the only one in my grade 12 graduating class who didn't know what they wanted to do. When I started university I initially took both science and arts, just to keep all my options open. When I began to sense a call to ministry I kept saying, “But how can I be sure of this?” This question became my biggest struggle. I even went on to do a whole master's degree in history because I felt I needed to be more sure that God was calling me to ministry. And when the Master's was finished I was back to the same question—“Is God calling me or not? How can I be sure?” My minister said, “Sometimes you just need to take a step of faith.” And the rest is history. I remember on the Sunday that my home church announced that I was a candidate for ministry. Maude came up to me afterward. And in her matter-of-fact manner she said with a twinkle in her eye, “We're glad you finally figured this out—the rest of us have known for some time.” Sometimes we just need to take a step of faith.

As we found out last week, Zechariah also needed to be sure. When the angel Gabriel announced to him that he and his wife would finally have a child, even in their old age, Zechariah asks, “How can I be sure of this?” Yet Gabriel's response to Zechariah is, in essence, “You can't be sure; you're going to have to trust.” That's what faith is: trusting in spite of the gnawing questions and doubts that we can't quite banish from our minds.

Even Zechariah the priest, this faithful man of God, still has doubts. We have this human need to be sure of things. We all struggle with doubt. Doubt is a normal part of our spiritual life. Martin Luther is said to have noted that “only God and certain madmen have no doubts.” Our brains are wired for questioning, for critical thinking. Doubts that inevitably arise are meant to lead us to dig deeper, to search for answers. Zechariah's question, however, points to a truth about life: there are very few things about which we can be 100 percent sure. Most decisions we make require a leap of faith. We have to make these decisions without knowing entirely how things will work out. Sometimes they work out, but other times they don't.

American Presbyterian, Frederick Buechner once wrote, “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.” While we, like Zechariah, crave certainty; truly we can never come to 100% certainty about anything. Instead, God gives us mystery and invites us to trust Him. If we focus only on the certainty we will miss some of the most amazing possibilities—like I would have without taking that step of faith toward my calling. Whole churches can get focused on certainty and get stuck in maintenance and survival mode, refusing to take a step of faith beyond how they’ve always done it—or beyond what their current budget is. But ultimately faith is a decision we make, one which we carefully and critically examine, but after having done so, we choose to believe. We choose to follow Christ and take a step of faith—beyond what’s certain.

In Advent we choose to put our trust in the God who came to us in Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem; who comes to us in the midst of our life’s most important decisions; and who will “soon and very soon” return to set the world right in a renewed heaven and earth. In Advent we nourish faith in the hope of Christ’s return. Yet still we doubt and ask, “How can we be certain.” And for Zechariah’s need for certainty he will be struck silent. A bit of silence could help us too.

What’s the longest you’ve gone without speaking? Could you go nine months without speaking? — Especially if you had such good news to tell. It’s like Gabriel is saying, “Sometimes you talk too much, Zechariah”—a problem for many of us preachers and pastors. “Now is the time to be still, to listen and to watch as God’s salvation unfolds before you.” Silence will nurture in Zechariah a new level of trust in God’s power that can allow for the leap of faith that’s necessary. Zechariah goes home, sleeps with his wife and as the angel promised, she conceives. While Zechariah has an imposed silence for nine months, Elizabeth chooses to be silent for five months. God seems to be saying, “It’s time to learn to be still and listen.” I guess it just takes men longer to learn that than women!

Sometimes we have so much noise in our lives that we can hardly hear. And let’s face it—Christmas is mainly a time of joyful noise-making. But Advent offers a different kind of experience, a different ethos all together. Advent invites us into silence, especially as we wait for the Lord. How many of God’s graces do we miss simply because we are too noisy and busy spinning plates and running on a hamster wheel to notice all of the ways that God comes to us. Running so fast all the time can make us deaf to God’s coming and more focused on our own need for control of things. By contrast, silence grows faith and peace—because God is a friend of silence. “Be still,” God says. “Take a deep breath. Listen. Remember who I am. I have not forgotten you.”

My first 7-day Silent Retreat was 28 years ago with the monks of Nova Nada, a Carmelite hermit community in the woods of Nova Scotia. Miles from neighbours or electricity, in true simplicity and disciplined silence I settled into my basic hermitage. Looking at my large box of books, my spiritual director for the week quietly said, “I think we need to do something about that. This is a time for holy leisure, not doing. We provide the time, the place and the quiet for you to be still and silent and simply enjoy

being with God and rest in God's doing – not yours." I began to learn that such silence is about "shifting my centre" away from myself, all my own doing, my need for control and surrendering to God instead.

The silence changed Zechariah. In today's story Zechariah and Elizabeth have chosen to believe and are ready now to take a step of faith. When the promised boy is born the neighbours come to name and circumcise him. They want to call him Zechariah after his father. But Elizabeth says, "No, his name will be John." They then turn to the silent father who writes, "His name is John." Notice that Zechariah does not say that the child's name "will be John," but that "it is John." Zechariah has surrendered his "I" and is stepping out in faith by being completely obedient to what he was told by the angel. He is ready to trust and to live by faith. And immediately he recovers the power of speech and begins to prophecy with the good news of God acting at last to do what he had promised centuries before.

These beautiful words draw heavily on Malachi and Isaiah and bring us a summary of what his son, John the Baptist, will do and what Jesus will do: "You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way. You will tell his people how to be saved through the forgiveness of their sins. Because of our God's deep compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us to give light to those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace."

The Greek words used here are loaded with grace in the same way that was used to describe the way someone might visit a lonely person or a widow in distress. In other words, this visit of God is a healing kind of visit. This is a type of visit motivated by an awareness that someone is hurting, and so you want to see if you can help. John will prepare for the gracious visit of God in Jesus—the dawn from heaven. Advent is a season to renew our trust in this gracious God who visits us in Jesus.

Advent invites us into a time of quiet reflection, wonder, and hope. It's a time to remember just how amazing God is and to lean hard into God's faithfulness. So I challenge you to try it. Experiment with solitude. Take a pre-dawn walk alone; listen to the awakening sounds of our world. Limit your speaking for a day and see what you learn about yourself and others. Take a one day silent retreat or leave your car radio off for a month and make your driving a mini-retreat; discover your own wilderness places of quiet and pray, "Come Lord Jesus."

For when we make space to welcome our Lord —our Lord comes with gracious gifts of faith and peace, he has not forgotten us.