

## THE MEANING OF SILENCE – DECEMBER 10, 2006

A Monologue in Character by The Reverend Ruth E. Shaver, delivered at the United Church of Schellsburg UCC, Schellsburg, PA  
The Second Sunday in Advent  
Luke 3:1-6, Luke 1:5-24, 57-80

As a very small girl, I wondered why my father made me sit with my brothers as he taught them to read and write the ancient language of our scriptures. He also expected me to learn to read and write Aramaic, which is the language of commerce and of everyday life for men. It was so very odd, because even as a child, I knew that women were not encouraged to be literate.

As I approached my womanhood, I worked up the courage to ask my father why he took me away from my household chores and into the school room with those incorrigible brothers of mine.

He laughed his gentle laugh and said, "Oh, Elizabeth, you're such a special child. God has many great things planned for you, things that I know only dimly. But he showed me that you need to be able to read and write in order to fulfill the things he has in store for you."

"Me? Who am I that God has chosen me for great things?" I thought.

But a few weeks later, my father introduced me to the son of one of his fellow priests and I forgot all about whatever plans God had for me.

My aunts complained a lot about my uncles. Their marriages, arranged as always when they were coming into womanhood, weren't happy ones – although I always thought my uncles were nice, as men went. My mother and father, by some miracle, were very happy together, and once I was able to read well enough, my mother made me help her memorize some of the poetry in the Song of Solomon for my father. It wasn't until my wedding night that I realized *why* my mother wanted to memorize some of the poetry for my father, and it wasn't until then that I really understood the difference between what my aunts had with my uncles and what my mother had with my father.

What I have with Zechariah is much like what my mother and father had.

And I have a lot of poetry from the Song of Solomon memorized.

Kiss me – full on the mouth!

Yes! For your love is better than wine,  
headier than your aromatic oils.

The syllables of your name murmur like a meadow brook.

No wonder everyone loves to say your name!<sup>1</sup>

I love my husband with all my heart. He's such a handsome man, tall and strong, with deep brown eyes and dimples that melt me whenever he flashes his quick smile my way. And he loves to talk, about anything and everything.

His mother told me that he was her curious child, always wandering off to explore the world around him when he was supposed to be gathering wood for her cooking fires and bringing home frogs and bugs and worms to keep as pets. He would spend hours watching these creatures, she said, just to see what happened when they slept and ate and did the unmentionable things that all animals do. When he was older, he'd wander away for an entire day and come back in time for dinner, filled with tales of artifacts he'd found in the caves outside of Jerusalem or with stories from the travelers he'd met along the road as he walked.

Even after we married, he would sometimes wander away for the day. He would come home brimming with things to share, his observations of the world and the people in it, Jews and Gentiles alike – though he didn't meet too many Gentiles other than the Roman soldiers and officials who started coming into Jerusalem after the Zealots were finally defeated when my father was a young man.

The first year of our marriage, we kept expecting to discover that I was with child. But every month, the hope would go away with my time.

The same thing happened the second year, the third year, and all the years after that.

I was Sarah. I was Rachel. I was Hannah. Barren and cursed, my womb dried up and not worthy of bearing a child.

Through all of those years, I so desperately wanted a child so that I could provide Zechariah with a son to carry on the family line of priests who served God at the Temple in Jerusalem and out among the people in the countryside between their weeks of Temple duties. But Zechariah, in his kindly, loving way, reassured me that if God willed us not to have children, that there must be a reason. And through it all, Zechariah's passion never wavered, nor did his love for me ever lessen but only increase.

---

<sup>1</sup> Song of Solomon 1:2-3, *The Message*.

Even when my time for bearing children ended, he loved me with more fervor than ever. When I complained about being useless to him as a wife, he chided me in the strongest tone he'd ever used with me in all our many years of marriage – 34 summers, by then.

“Elizabeth, you are so much more to me than a vessel to bear children. Don't you know by now that you are my chosen one, my beloved? You are my garden of hope. ‘I went to my garden, dear friend, best lover! Breathed the sweet fragrance. I ate the fruit and honey, I drank the nectar and wine.’<sup>2</sup> I want to breath your fragrance, eat fruit and honey, drink nectar and wine until we are too old to know what a garden is, my love. No more moaning about not having children. I am content to be with you. Please, be content to be with me.”

It was hard, but I learned in the next few years to be content with what God had given me. Looking back, I feel so foolish that it took so long.

How many women have lives filled with such love from their husbands? How many women are so welcomed into their husbands' families, so trusted and respected as an aunt and friend by their nieces even when those same nieces become mothers themselves?

And so I slipped past my 55<sup>th</sup> summer, no longer feeling dried up and empty but overflowing with kindness and joy.

Zechariah's section of priests had their second Temple duty of the year in the fall of my 55<sup>th</sup> year. He went into Jerusalem from our home in Ephraim, about a day's walk north of the city, certain that this would finally be his time to enter the Holy of Holies to burn the incense for worship. He just felt, somehow, that God would choose him when lots were cast for that once-in-a-lifetime privilege.

Imagine my surprise when Zechariah came home struck dumb!

His fellow priests tried to tell me what had happened, but my husband waved them off with gestures more impatient than I had ever seen him use before. He went so far as to shoo them out of our house, oblivious to their protests that he would never be able to communicate to me what I really needed to know.

Clearly, he was fine physically, but the complete silence of my normally loquacious husband scared me more than I wanted him to know. Was this just one symptom of a more serious problem that I would be left with in the middle of the night – like the palsy that killed his father so slowly many years before?

---

<sup>2</sup> Song of Solomon 5:1, *The Message*.

I was only slightly reassured by the blistering kiss he gave me once the house was completely empty of our well-meaning but obviously bothersome friends. One thing I did know in that moment: Zechariah had been in the Holy of Holies this time, just as he had known he would be.

When he let me go, he dragged out his big composition slate, the one he used to draft letters for his scribes to copy and send for business, and set to writing furiously. He came to the end of the slate and passed it across his desk to me to read.

I could hardly believe my eyes!

Well, wouldn't you be a bit surprised to be told that the angel Gabriel had visited your husband to say that the two of you, well past the time for having children, were going to be parents of a child who would be the messenger of the Messiah?

In that moment, all became clear to me in ways that I never knew could be true.

This was why my father had taught me to read. This moment, to be able to learn from my husband himself, rather than through an interpreter, had been foretold to my father more than 50 years ago – and he had heeded that word and done as God asked, just so I could...

Be far more like Sarah and Rachel and Hannah than I ever imagined I could be!

Sarah gave birth to Isaac and became the matriarch of an entire nation. Rachel gave birth to Joseph, who saved his people from famine. Hannah gave birth to Samuel, who anointed Saul and David as kings of Israel.

And I – I gave birth to John, who sleeps soundly in his cradle now, unaware of what God has planned for him.

For weeks after Zechariah came home, we floated through life, oblivious to the strange looks we received whenever we went out, him gesticulating wildly and me interpreting for him. With the blessing from God of a promised child, we spent more time than ever making sure God had every opportunity to fulfill his promise, to the point that my nieces accused me of acting like a new bride.

And then came the day when I knew God's promise had begun. My body began to change as I had seen so many other women's bodies change with pregnancy. Zechariah would lay his head against my stomach as if to try to hear our baby's heart beating inside of me. He catered to my every whim, earning derisive laughter from many of his business associates and fellow priests, who thought that perhaps his interview with the archangel Gabriel had left him not just dumbstruck but dumb stupid, too.

It didn't matter. He went on showering me with kindness even as I began to show and could no longer go out in public. And when my cousin Anna's daughter Mary came to see me, he made sure Mary had everything she needed before he retreated respectfully from my parlor.

Perhaps he could see on Mary's face, as I could, that something lay heavily on her heart – heavily, yet with a lightness that defied definition.

What she told me made my heart leap. And John, too, leapt in my womb when Mary told me that she, a young woman from Nazareth, would bear the Messiah of the world.

God's plan was coming to fruition before my eyes, as the messenger did somersaults within me and I cried with and hugged the Messiah's mother.

Mary stayed with me until John was born. Being the only girl in her family and the oldest child, to boot, she had never witnessed a birth, and she asked shyly if she could assist me so she would know what to do when her time comes. Such a sweet girl she is, with a beautiful smile and startlingly green eyes, something we see so rarely here among our own people. She was so calm, so helpful when my time came, particularly with Zechariah, who kept wanting to break the taboo against men in the birthing room to come in and sit with me.

Mary started on her way home yesterday when her father came through on his way back to Nazareth from Jerusalem. She wanted to stay until John had been named, but the time for her betrothal is fast approaching and she has much to do to be ready to move into her intended's family home. She also needs to tell Joseph about her own visit from Gabriel, which she fears will change things tremendously.

I told her not to worry. God's plans work out when people of faith have the courage to follow through. And from all I've heard about Joseph, he is a man of deep faith.

So is Zechariah. Tomorrow, another part of God's plan will be complete, when John is circumcised and named according to God's will.

What scares me is the part of God's plan that will happen long after I have died.

As I sat here a little while ago, watching my beloved son as he sleeps, I had a vision of my own. It's not a happy vision, at the end.

I saw my John, preaching and teaching the prophets' message from of old: Repent! Return to God's ways! God will save his people when you come back to him! And I heard him telling his followers of the one who comes after him – the Messiah, who will judge us all and cast the unworthy ones into eternal fire.

This is powerful, an incredible witness to God's reign over the earth. But earthly powers still reign, too, and one earthly power will arrest my son and have him beheaded just to please his wife.

If it were not assured to me that this was a true vision, I would pray for it to be a nightmare. No mother wants to know how her son will die. But because I know how he will live, as a faithful servant of God and as the messenger who prepares the way for the Messiah, I at least am assured that John will never be alone, even unto his death. For that, at least, I can be thankful – as thankful for that as I am to be the mother of a child at long last, a child whose purpose is high and sacred.

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”<sup>3</sup>

God is good! I am no longer a barren woman but a mother, blessed and fulfilled for God's purposes. Glory to God in the highest!

---

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:76-79, NRSV