

Faithfulness in the midst of God's silence

Luke 1:5-25; 57-66

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Can you think back to a time when you desperately wanted to hear God's voice? Maybe it was about a job, or the choice of a mate, or during a battle with cancer or being bullied at school, or when the bank account was almost empty, or when you could not have children, or could not be freed from a habitual sin. You went to church. You read your Bible. You prayed. You did everything you knew to do and yet God said nothing . . . complete silence. So what did you do? Did you turn towards God or against Him?

The Jews were very familiar with this idea of "the silence of God." We read in the Old Testament that God had spoken through the prophets promising a day when a Messiah, a Savior, would come to deliver His people. The final words of the Old Testament in Malachi 4:5-6 even told them what to look for:

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

So they took these words and they waited. Generation after generation, century after century, but yet there was no sign of this Savior, the Messiah. The "waiting" lasted 400 years. This was the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament. During this time they were conquered by the Greeks and eventually by the Romans. As a nation they also continued to drift away from God. They heard nothing from God. Some chose to forget the prophecies, but some held on to the ancient scriptures and continued to pray for the day that the Messiah would come. Finally the silence was broken. The Bible tells us the story in Luke 1.

Luke 1:5 tells us of a man named Zechariah. He was a priest and was married to a woman named Elizabeth. All priests were descendants of Moses' brother Aaron (Exodus 28:1-3). Elizabeth, his wife, was also a descendant of Aaron. That meant that her grandfather, her father, her brothers and her uncles were all priests. The service of God was the purpose of her entire family. On top of that they named her Elizabeth, which was the name of Aaron's wife which means "My God is Faithful" (Exodus 6:23). Zechariah's devotion to God was not just outward religion, it was authentic faith in God.

Luke 1:6 tell us that, *"They were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years."* It does not say that they were righteous in the sight of man, they were righteous before God, the God who sees everything. They did not just look religious from the outside, they were righteous in the secret recesses of their heart on the inside. Some might argue, "but have not all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God? How can they be righteous?" The same way it always happened. Remember in Genesis 15:6, *"And he (Abraham) believed God and it was counted unto him as righteousness."* They believed God and He counted them as righteous. Even though God was silent, Zechariah the priest and his wife Elizabeth believed in God's faithfulness, and in return walked faithfully with God.

In this time of history there were about 18,000 priests in Israel. They were divided into 24 divisions. Each division would minister to the people in the villages where they lived. But two weeks a year each division would serve in Jerusalem to carry out the religious rituals and functions at the temple. This was a privilege for the priests to be able to handle the sacred things of God in this way.

That is what was happening in Luke 1. Zechariah was in Jerusalem working in the temple with the rest of the priests from his division. By a process of casting lots, he was chosen to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. This meant that at the given time he would take coals from the altar of the burnt offering and place them in a gold bowl. As the crowd watched and bowed to pray, Zechariah would then walk up the steps and enter into the temple. This would be the first and last time he would ever have opportunity to enter the temple of God. It must have been a truly significant event in his life.

After entering he would have walked to the far end, to the golden altar of incense. This would have been right next to the curtain of the Holy of Holies. As he stood in that place, he would have been a few meters from the very presence of God. There he would dump the burning coals into the golden altar of incense. He would spread them with a utensil and then place the incense on top of the coals. Immediately a column of smoke with the fragrance of the incense would have risen and begun to spread throughout the temple. It was at this moment that the 400 years of silence was broken.

Luke 1:11-16 describes it this way:

¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name

John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

Zechariah and Elizabeth would miraculously have a son. They were to name him John. He would be great before the Lord. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. *“And he would turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he would go before Him in the spirit and the power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children.”* With almost the same words that the Old Testament was closed, the New Testament was opened. Confirming the continuing of one story that God began at creation and would now continue with the sending of His Son. Christianity is not 2,000 years old. It started before **creation** in the mind of God. The New Testament is a continuation of the Old. The Old points forward to Christ, and the New points back to Him. Neither are complete without the other.

When Zechariah first heard from the angel that Elizabeth was going to have a son, he did not believe. Because of this, God made him mute. As he exited the temple everyone wanted to know why it took so long. He tried to motion to them, but he no longer could speak. This condition continued for 9 months, until the son, John, was born. The family and friends who were present asked what the new child's name would be. When Zechariah wrote, “John” on the paper, immediately his voice returned and he praised God. All the people began to wonder what was in store for this child with such a miraculous birth.

In Mark 1, this John, the son of Zechariah, is spoken of as, *“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”* Through the message of the angel and John's miraculous birth, Luke is tying John to Jesus as the forerunner, the “Elijah” who was to come. Once the people understood that John was the promised forerunner, then all they had to do was follow him to the Messiah.

This John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, would grow up to be known as John the Baptist. As one followed him, he would eventually be led directly to Jesus of Nazareth, the promised Savior and Messiah. We read about this moment in John 1:29, *“The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”*

Now back to the focus of this sermon. Is it normal for God to be silent in the life of someone who believes in Him?

We must not forget that the preparation for Christ that came through John the Baptist was preceded by Zechariah and Elizabeth's “faithfulness in the midst of God's silence.” We see similar faithfulness in the midst of silence in the life of Joseph after he is sold into slavery by his brothers. We see faithfulness in the midst of silence as Moses cares for sheep in the wilderness for 40 years. We see faithfulness in the midst of the silence as David continues to flee the threat of King Saul. We see faithfulness in the midst of

the silence as Ruth leaves her people and honors Naomi, her mother-in-law. We see faithfulness in the midst of the silence as Daniel is dropped into the lion's den. We see faithfulness in the midst of the silence as the followers of Christ pray in the upper room in Jerusalem, waiting for the Holy Spirit to come at Pentecost.

Oh, to have this kind of faith. A faith that stands strong in the midst of the silence. A faith that is so convinced of the goodness of God that even silence cannot shake it. So how does one come to the point where they are prepared to be faithful, even in God's silence?

When you experience the silence of God you should consider 5 things:

- 1)** Do you believe in Jesus Christ? Have you ever turned from your sin and surrendered your life to follow Jesus Christ? If so, the Holy Spirit lives in you and will strengthen you in the midst of the silence. He will be your strength in times of weakness. He will be the One who guides you into truth as you open the scriptures.
- 2)** If in the present it seems that God is silent, we need to go back to the scriptures and learn from what God has said in the past. We need to look to scriptures in the Old and New Testament to see how he relates with His people. It is in these stories that we see God's character, His faithfulness, and His purposes. As we get to know Him through His Word we grow to trust Him, even when we can't see how He is working.

Some will be tempted to doubt or turn away, but in these moments we must be reminded of the God of the Bible. In John 14:8 we read that God is love. God is always working (John 5:17). God's ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Is. 55:8-9). His understanding has no limit (Psalm 147:4-5). God works all things together in the life of a Christian to make him or her more like Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:28). Facts like these are the foundational truths that allow us to stand in faith as we follow Jesus even in the seasons of silence.

- 3)** Our faith is also strengthened when we remember how God has been faithful in the past. We need to stop and think back through all the times that God has been faithful to us. As we remember these situations our faith is strengthened from our firsthand experience with God. In the Old Testament they did this by building an altar in a location where God had moved mightily. In your life you might record God's faithfulness in a journal.
- 4)** A similar benefit comes from spending time with other Christians and hearing how God works in their lives. As we share our stories it helps strengthen each other's faith. We see again how great, creative and trustworthy our God is.
- 5)** We also need to pray for the ability to recognize God's voice. At times we feel that God is silent but He is not. It often is because He is speaking in ways we never imagined. We must remember that knowing Christ is of utmost importance. Because of that, God will allow circumstances to come into our lives so that we can experience Him, firsthand, as our Provider,

Protector, Counselor, Prince of Peace, Savior and Lord. At times God allows difficulties so that we turn to Him and trust Him more fully. It could be that God is being faithful in the silence. It also could be that God is speaking all around us, but we do not know what to listen for. Either way, call out to Him. Think back to his Word and His deeds, and ask for faith . . . even in the silence.

Through His Spirit, His people, His past actions, and His Word we will come to know the One who is faithful in the silence. In return we will be prepared to do the same.