

CELTIC ADVENT: SILENCE & SOLITUDE

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Luke 1:5-20

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.
⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense.
¹⁰Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then

there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah, he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'
¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.'
¹⁹The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, 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.'

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REFLECT & DISCUSS

1. Read the passage(s) slowly. Then take a deep breath and read it again. What word, phrase, or image stands out to you?
2. Zechariah was rendered mute, unable to speak, and struggled to communicate what he experienced. Do you have an experience of actively struggling to communicate a profound or disorienting experience? If so, what happened? What did you learn?
3. Have you ever had a religious or spiritual experience that was difficult to describe, at least at first? What happened? How do you talk about it now?
4. What do you make of Zechariah's time of silence? Consider how this silence might have impacted his daily life. What blessing or learning might have been embedded in this experience?
5. Have you ever taken a "time of silence" for an hour, a day, or an extended season? Why? What did you experience or learn?
6. Being alone can be experienced in different ways: as a peaceful and meaningful "solitude" or as an anxious and painful "loneliness." What helps you experience solitude? Why might solitude be an important spiritual reality to

cultivate and regularly embrace? How do we go about it in the hustle and noise (and fear and suffering) of our contemporary lives?

7. Advent means "arrival" and is the season in which the church waits, with great anticipation, for what God brings about in Christ. How do you practice "Advent"? What are you waiting for or longing for this season?

PASTORAL NOTE

Elizabeth and Zechariah experienced infertility. They are not alone. Perhaps as many as 1 in 7 couples are affected by infertility. Even so, this wearying journey often gets overlooked in scripture and in society. And if that is your experience, know you are loved and not alone.

Whether or not this is your personal experience, you can reflect on how this time of year (and the stories of miracle childbirth) can be hard for couples impacted by infertility, miscarriages, barriers to adoption, or frustrated dreams of family. How can God's people be a compassionate and comforting presence?

If you have experienced or struggled with any of these (or know family or friends who have), reflect on what you discovered was helpful or supportive for you or for them.

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