

This morning, this second week of the Advent, we are introduced to John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, cousin to Jesus, also known as John the Baptist. John is integral to God's story and divine plan, so significant that we will hear about him, not only today *but also* next week.

But John's story begins long before we encounter him in the wilderness, and isn't that the case with each of ours? Long before we are born, perhaps at the point of conception like John and Jesus, or when news of our impending birth was verified, our parents and families experienced a wide range of emotions and began to wonder and ask themselves important questions: who will this child be? What will this child do? Will they be healthy and strong? And what shall we name this child?

Luke 1 tells us that Zechariah, a temple priest and his wife Elizabeth, a descendant of Aaron. were faithful, righteous people, blameless before God and that they followed all the commandments. They had no children, nor any expectation for them, as they were getting older. Yet, deep in their hearts this longing for a child persisted.

Enter Gabriel, angel and messenger of God, comes bearing amazing news to God's beloved Zechariah, and he is terrified. And let's be honest: who wouldn't be? Before Zechariah can say anything, Gabriel speaks the most common words found in scripture:

Do not be afraid, and then he goes on: -your prayer has been heard.
-Elizabeth will bear a son
-you will name him John.
-you will have joy and gladness
-He'll be great in the Lord's sight, filled with the Holy Spirit,

And...

he will turn many people of Israel to the Lord their God, going ahead of the Lord, with the power and spirit of Elijah (a prophet of old), the hearts of parents will turn to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous.

John, your son, will make ready a people, prepared for the Lord.

WOW! All the possible questions answered right then and there. It's a lot to hold.

And Zechariah doubts, and he questions Gabriel, and Gabriel in return silences him.

“because you didn't believe my words, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

And so it was that Zechariah was rendered speechless, unable to even tell his wife of what the angel had proclaimed.

Elizabeth conceives, and she basks in God's favor with gratitude. About six months into her pregnancy, our resident messenger Gabriel then pays a visit to her relative, Mary, proclaiming even more miraculous news! She, a young woman not formally attached to a man, will conceive and bear a son. Yes, by the Holy Spirit's power, this holy child, called the Son of God, will be born — seemingly an impossible feat. But just Elizabeth, who was said to be barren, was now expecting, she could be assured that nothing will be impossible with God.

So, With a presence & calm greater than we might imagine, Mary receives and accepts the angel's news, sets off for the house of Zechariah, where John in útero leaps with joy and Elizabeth herself proclaims Mary to be the mother of her Lord. All the while, poor Zechariah can't do anything but watch, bear witness, and listen as Mary offers her song to God, singing God's praises, describes God's character and tells of all God will do for God's people.

Fast forward three months: Zechariah and Elizabeth's son is born. Still unable to speak, Zechariah beholds his son, and names the child John, by writing it on a tablet. And in this moment, he voice returns.

Now, If you were unable to speak for nine months, and then suddenly could do so again, what might be the first words you would speak?

Not unlike Mary, Zechariah begins by praising the God of Israel, and God's mighty deeds to come, including the upcoming birth of the Son of God. And then this proud and humbled papa proclaims aloud the future into which God has called his newborn son, John:

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
you will go before the Lord, to prepare His ways,
to give his people knowledge of salvation by the
forgiveness of their sins,

Zechariah concludes by proclaiming the tender mercy of our God, the one who will break forth into the world, who shines upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, who guides their feet into the way of peace. In his words we hear a profound reverence for God, and the humility of one upon whom God's favor has been bestowed. We are assured of the hope and promise of God, which he has seen brought to life with the birth of his own beloved son.

John grows strong in body and in spirit, and this is where our Gospel story picks up.

It is a time of overt Roman occupation, of emperors, governors and corrupted rulers -both empiric and religious. God's people suffer and have lost their hope. The question on their hearts is: **Where is our God?**

And it is in this moment in history that God's sends his Word upon John, inspiring him to cry out to all who would listen: to come and turn back to their God, that through baptism their sins will be forgiven. With passion and urgency, John counters their question: Where is our God, with a different one: **Do you see God who is coming ahead of you?**

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, John sets forth to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah, Malachi, and even that of his own father — to be the final prophet of the great prophets, whose voice crying out in the wilderness with urgency and pleading, calls God's beloved back to their God, so that they may trust again in the promise and hope given by the Holy One of Israel who has not abandoned them in their exile, but who walks alongside them, and has now sent Godself into the world to save them.

I think that God's invitation to us this week is to practice our listening. Out in the wilderness, John, taking sustenance from the land, listens and waits for God's word. Perhaps he learned such vulnerability and patience from his own father Zechariah, to whom nine months of being unable to speak might have felt like a place of wilderness, but which gave him an unparalleled opportunity to notice, to watch and to listen.

I just returned from a silent retreat in Big Sur at Camaldoli Hermitage. Nature, silence, stillness — and the opportunity not to speak into God's listening, but to quiet my own voice to hear God wants to say to me.

A place of wilderness is not John's undoing, nor that of his father. Rather, the wilderness was a place that prepared them to hear God's voice, to surrender their own ideas, so they could receive and honor those of God.

The word of God is found in scripture, and spoken through the prophets. It is also found in the silence and, most often, the word of God is voiced through others. As humans, we come to know and see and hear and experience our God by virtue of the voices of other human beings - those who bear wisdom, who challenge us, who grace us with compassion and love. Yes, God speaks thru prophets, but more importantly, through the voices of ordinary people like you and me. God knows that God's people long to see and hear God, and so God finds ways to do so.

One of the beautiful things about John's prophetic word is that it is an old word that has been spoken through the prophets over the centuries, by his

own father, and now spoken by him, it is made new in his time. It is in the telling and the re-telling of God's word that it is also made new in our time. What we witness in John the baptizer is divine life joining with human life: John's voice as it cries out is not only his, but also is the voice of the prophets of old and is that of God.

On behalf of God, John calls them, God's people, to participate and play a part in the unfolding of God's salvation and grace. The Messiah, the Christ, will soon be among them, and the invitation to welcome him will present itself.

John's timeless cry is also for us today. We must remember that God comes in Christ, not simply to be seen or to behold, but with every intention of changing and disrupting the world.

Can we hear, and listen, as John challenges us to make room in our lives and hearts to welcome and receive God's incarnate salvation found in Jesus today?

In this advent season of reflection and stillness, the Baptist beckons us return again and again to our God, to not lose hope, to prepare his way by opening our ears, hearts, eyes and souls to God's Word made Flesh, and to take our place alongside him, so that all the world might know and believe.