

"The Voices of Women"
Luke 1:39-55
December 17, 2017 Advent 3
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The good news of the coming of Jesus often come in voices from the margins.

Do you listen to your wife? If you're married and you're a man, you are nodding your head and saying, "Of course, I do. I always listen to her." But do you? How often has she said, "You never really listen to me?" How often have you been distracted by what's on TV and all of a sudden you realize that she's been talking and you have no idea what she just said? Or were you thinking about something else or thinking about what you wanted to say next, and you sort of missed the last point she made? If you were to ask Erin, I'm sure she would say that it happens with alarming regularity. I'm sure it happens occasionally with some of you. And when it does, do you say, "I'm sorry, sweetheart, I got distracted and I wasn't really listening to that last part. Would you mind telling me again?" No, you don't. You say, "Of course I was listening!" and you try to fake your way through it. But were you really listening. No, you weren't. Why not? Why didn't you listen?

One of the things we are learning in our society recently is to listen to the voices of women. It is unavoidably true that we live in a patriarchal culture, and that has been true for thousands of years. There are advantages to being a man. We get paid more, we have more respect in most professions, we're often considered smarter or wiser than women. In many ways, most having nothing to do with what we've done or who we are, we have more power than women. And we're listened to more than women. Why do you think that is?

In centuries past, it was believed that women were driven more by their feelings and men more by reason, so of course men were wiser, smarter, and more to be listened to. Women were more likely to become hysterical if they were present with difficulties. Do you know where that word comes from, hysterical? The root of "hysterical" is hystera-the Greek word for "womb." You might recognize it in our surgical term, "hysterectomy." So, what does being hysterical have to do with a womb?

The answer lies in the pages of Greek philosophy. Sadly, Plato and Aristotle had a less than stellar

record when it came to enlightened understandings of the sexes. For example, at the heart of Plato's work was his contention that emotional responses to the world were faulty reactions. The goal of philosophy (and indeed, of society itself) was to help men cultivate their powers of pure reason so as to be freed from the shackles of raw, undisciplined emotion. While this pursuit of reason was the ultimate goal for a man, Plato argued that it was an impossible quest for a woman, for, according to the author of *The Republic*, women were at their core emotional creatures. Then, demonstrating that his medical knowledge was as shallow as his chauvinism was deep, Plato and other philosophers argued that a woman's womb was the seat of her irrationality. They claimed that from time to time a woman's womb would actually uproot itself and travel around inside her body. When a womb began migrating about a woman's body, the philosophers believed it led to general emotional upset. Hence, a diagnosis of "hysteria," literally, "of the womb."¹

That's what makes Luke's story so different, so radical. Because it's a story about the voices of women. Luke starts his story of the birth of Jesus with two characters that we don't hear about very much, Elizabeth and Zechariah. Zechariah is a priest, and Elizabeth is a descendant of the Hebrew people's first high priest, Aaron. This is a religious couple, but, Luke tells us, what set Elizabeth and Zechariah apart was not their family or professional connections, but they were righteous people-blameless folks. Oh, and one more thing, writes Luke, like other many couples whose stories appear in the Hebrew Scriptures, these two good people had no children. Remember Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rachel, and others. They had prayed for a child, but the months and years went by without a pregnancy-without a baby-and now they were getting old; they were past the age when prayers for a child seemed sensible; they had aged to the point where hoping for a baby was no longer prudent. I suspect that over time Elizabeth and Zechariah made their peace with this fate.

Then came the event that would change everything. Zechariah received an honor. The aging priest was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the temple in Jerusalem to burn incense. This was a big deal. A

¹ Johnson, Scott Black

priest was only allowed to do this once in a lifetime. Some priests never got to do it, never to draw the specially marked stone from the jar, never to be so fortunate as to enter that portion of the temple where God was thought to reside. This was a very big deal. It was a bit scary, too, for around this ritual were ancient, frightening tales that warned of incense offerings gone horribly awry-one story in particular described how two of Aaron's sons were consumed by fire while on duty as priests bearing incense to God. The message behind such anecdotes was clear: If you were to waltz into the sanctuary with an unclean heart, the divine holiness could fry you to a crisp. With stories like that being whispered among his fellow priests, I imagine that Zechariah entered the temple with as spotless a spirit as he could muster. And yet, even a healthy piety had not prepared him for what he would encounter in the sanctuary, for, as Zechariah approached the altar to ignite his fragrant herbs, to create the smoke which would carry their prayers up to God, the priest was suddenly, utterly terrified. He was gripped by fear. You might even say that Zechariah was hysterical. Because there, was an angel. Not just any angel, but Gabriel, one of the four archangels of the heavenly host. Although I suppose any angel would be impressive enough, but this is Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and he tells Zechariah that he and Elizabeth will have a child, a son, and they are to name him John. Zechariah had enough of his wits about him to ask how that could be since both he and his wife were getting old. That's when the angel strikes him mute, unable to speak until the child is born. Can you imagine? Nine months of silence. Now he has to listen to his wife.

That's the radical thing about Luke's story. The ones who speak are the women. Zechariah has been silenced. Joseph, you may notice, is nowhere to be found, let alone heard. In Luke's story, the visit of the angel comes not to Joseph in a dream, but to Mary. Zechariah is mute. It is Elizabeth who speaks. It is Mary who sings about what this child will mean. Luke's point seems to be, it is not the voices of the rich and powerful, it is not the voices of the respected religious leaders, it is not the voices of the political elite, it is not the voices of the 1% that we hear telling the good news of the coming of Jesus.

It is the women. And soon it will be the shepherds, the despised underclass, the poor. It will be the foreigners, the strangers, those from some far country we're not even at peace with. They will tell of the good news of Jesus. It is the voices from the margins of society, those that no one really listens to.

Do we hear those voices? Because we hear so many voices at this time of year. Voices that are telling us what to buy, how to be happy, who to support, what we should do. Voices that are concerned with our wallet and our security and our reputation and our wealth and everything else we want to hold on to. But the message of Mary and Elizabeth is different than what we most often hear during Advent and Christmas. Most often we hear the voices asking us if we are ready—do we have all our present bought, is the house clean enough, do we have food in the house for the hordes that are descending upon us? Isn't that what we think of when someone asks us, "Are you ready for Christmas?" But when Mary sings, when the babe jumps in Elizabeth's womb, they have a different kind of message, theirs are voices that we do not often hear. Voices that speak of lifting up the poor, feeding the hungry, turning the powers of the world upside down. The voices from the margins remind us that the true power in the world is not in Washington, or on Wall Street, it was not on a throne in Rome or in a palace in Jerusalem, but with a poor couple making the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, with an old woman surprisingly pregnant, that the world will be turned upside down not by the power of armies and economic strength but by a baby born in a stable. Do we hear the voices with that message? They are out there, if we listen. The voices of women, of the poor, of the stranger. It's the voice of creation itself—do you hear it when the birds are at the feeder, or when the woods behind your house are filling up with snow? Do you hear the voice telling you that what you are waiting for this Advent is something far different than what the commercials on TV say or what the catalogs that fill up your mailbox proclaim? If you listen you can even hear it the songs we sing, in between Jingle Bells and White Christmas come words like "Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free, from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee." Freedom, forgiveness, rest—that's a different

message of Christmas isn't it? Or do you hear the words of the old carol "It Came upon the Midnight Clear":

And you, beneath life's crushing load,
whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way
with painful steps and slow;
look now, for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing;
oh, rest beside the weary road
and hear the angels sing.

Glad and golden hours are not ones that are filled with things and feasts, but they are times when we can sit and listen, when we can hear the voices of the angels. Father Richard Rohr reminds us, "We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more." Could we say that about Christmas—it's not about having more, but being more? Being more just, more forgiving, more peaceful, more loving, more compassionate. Do we hear the voices with that message this Christmas?

Remember that the Spirit that falls on Elizabeth and the spirit that causes Mary to rejoice in God her Savior—that "spirit" in Hebrew is in the feminine case. The Holy Spirit could be said to be the feminine expression of God. When we listen to these voices—voices of women, voices of creation, voices that speak to our hearts out of the silence, we are listening to the voice of God. It could be that Gabriel gives a great blessing to Zechariah—nine months of silence. What voices did he hear during that time of waiting, that time of Advent? Did he hear the voice of the Spirit? Can we hear it?