

**Sermon Notes – December 10, 2017**  
**“Christmas Struggles”**  
**Brian Walton**

As you will be aware, we have been considering characters from the Christmas story in these weeks leading up to Christmas Eve. The character we have chosen to focus on this week is the temple priest named, Zechariah. In this ancient text we learn that it's Zechariah's turn to perform the rituals of the Jerusalem temple and specifically to go behind the screen and burn incense on the altar with the hope that the prayers of the people will be lifted to God on the rising smoke. In the midst of performing this task Zechariah is confronted by an angel who tells him that he and his wife - who have remained childless into their senior years - are about to become pregnant. Although the language of the text is more subtle, Zechariah responds with the modern equivalent of, "You've got to be kidding me!!" As the story progresses we learn that the angel is displeased by Zechariah's response and chastises him by making him mute – unable to speak – until the birth of his son some 9 months later. In the closing verses of this story we see Zechariah coming out from behind the screen to his waiting congregation, unable to speak, left only to gesture about what has happened.

In our staff planning for this Advent series we thought that the muteness of Zechariah was a symbol for all those who feel silenced by Christmas optimism. The cheery tunes, the party chit-chat, and the excitement around gifts, limit the opportunity to name grief or worry or financial hardship. The challenges of life and the burdens we carry seem to have no place in Christmas celebrations. Those who carry grief for loved ones now gone; those whose families are fraught by long standing

disagreements; those caught up in the web of addiction; those who have had important relationships end; those who struggle to make ends meet - indeed all of us in one way or another – are made mute by the spirit of relentless optimism which suggests if we get the right present, the right decorations or the right festive platter all will be well. I honour the courage of Dianne who was willing to stand before us this morning and remind us that life is a mixed bag of loves and losses, of successes and failures, of intimate togetherness and existential loneliness. I honour her voice, for in some respects she speaks for all of us, in acknowledging that the Christmas season, like life itself, contains celebration and struggle.

As we considered this passage in the Spiritual Conversations groups someone pressed the Zechariah story even further. Our member declared that it was not fair that Zechariah should be punished (made mute) for his disbelief. After all, he and his wife Elizabeth have tried for decades to become pregnant and now, in their senior years, they have concluded that it is no longer possible. Even if some kind of miracle is to happen, what kind of God is it who punishes an old man for his incredulity? As I surveyed our group almost every person present suggested that they did not believe in a God who punishes people. The helpful agitator in our group challenged us – “well, if God is not responsible for our hardships, why should we credit God with our blessings?” To restate her question - If God is not the author of our problems, can God be the author of our triumphs? We sometimes see athletes credit God with the successful interception of a pass, but is God equally culpable for making some other poor bloke miss the ball?

We were not necessarily unanimous in our belief, but the Spiritual Conversations group concluded that God is not a puppet master; that God does not have, or perhaps has relinquished, the power to dictate good and ill. Perhaps the power that God has retained is the power of love – not a weak power to be sure, but not a power that can dictate the circumstances of our lives. What if this God, what if this power of love, acts to companion us on the journey of life? What if this God-power, this love-power is at our side in the highs and the lows of our lives? I recall standing on the front step of my family home waiting for the ambulance as my father's heart was beating its last. Even though my prayer for a miraculous healing went unanswered I sensed that God was near, at my side, in those who loved me, and in the memories that followed. God has the power to companion us through life's circumstances. Each human life seems to rise and fall, rise and fall during the journey which is life. I believe that if we open ourselves to God's love, we will be companioned through the journey.

The God of the nativity is not the God of endless sweetness and light; not the God of happy ever after. If we are honest, the Christmas story speaks about real life as it weaves between promise and fear, between birth and flight from persecution, between a life of inspiration and a life of challenge, ultimately, between cross and resurrection. Christians have always proclaimed that in Jesus we have seen God's intention to dwell with us. I believe it is so. Sometimes the power of God dwells with us in moments of quiet contemplation; sometimes God's presence sustains us when we shed tears; but mostly God still chooses to dwell in human form, God chooses to empower us to enact God's companionship.

Our Buddhist friends cut to the chase when they list as one of their four noble truths that all life is filled with suffering and a second truth, that our suffering is enhanced if we believe it to be otherwise. I remember a Buddhist student I taught for a short while. He was the proud father of a new baby but expressed concern to me about his wife because he felt she was too invested in their new child. He advocated that she be less committed to the babe because everything in life is impermanent - sooner or later the child would disappoint or move or even die. There is much that I can learn from Buddhism but I am a Christian because our story says we should invest passionately in life despite the inevitable losses. At the heart of traditional Christian theology is belief that God chose to invest in the world (we call that Christmas) even though God knew it would end in the cross. Despite Dianne's legacy of grief, I imagine that she does not regret investing in love.

And in those days when grief threatens to obscure love she invites us to let God be made manifest through our willingness to befriend her, to be open-hearted even if we are at a loss for words, to help her to remember and to speak of her beloved, and to hug her. I dare say that we should cherish this advice whenever we are called to incarnate the God-power and especially in the celebrations and the struggles of this season. May the God who is love always be your companion. Amen.