

December 5, 2018 – Luke 1:5-23

The silencing of Zechariah is quite an ironic scene. More ironic than we realize, perhaps. After all, Zechariah was a priest who made his living with his voice. His vocation was to bless, to pray, to teach. And yet, God leaves him like a quarterback without an arm. Voiceless and unable to even finish his temple service with the customary blessing.

Zechariah was a descendant of the priestly family of Aaron, the brother of Moses. What was Aaron's job during the Exodus? To speak confidently and eloquently on Moses' behalf. Yet, Zechariah, a son of Aaron, couldn't say a single word.

And then we get the irony of Zechariah's name. "Zechariah" means "God remembers." And when the Bible talks about God remembering, it has nothing to do with his ability to recollect an event. When God remembers, He acts.

So when Gabriel told Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a child, even in her old age, and when God told Zechariah that he would have a miraculous son, a son who would go before the promised Messiah, God was doing just that: remembering His people. God's action that day in the temple was a fulfillment of Zechariah's name.

Yet, the man whose very name means "God remembers" didn't believe that God was about to act. God remembered, but Zechariah forgot. He forgot God's actions throughout the Old Testament. He forgot what God did for Abraham and barren Sarah, Isaac and barren Rebekah, Jacob and barren Rachel. He forgot just how good God is, and he doubted God's word.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are both described as "righteous before God." That's because their hope was in the Lord and in His promise to act and send the Messiah. Zechariah probably prayed regularly for this. Yet when the Lord answered his prayer, he doubted the words of the angel and sought an additional sign. His offense was not in expecting too much from the Lord. It was in expecting too little.

There's an ancient legend about a beggar who approached Alexander the Great. Feeling exceedingly generous, Alexander ordered the beggar to be made the governor of five cities. The beggar was overwhelmed with gratitude and said, "I didn't ask for that much." Alexander replied, "You asked like the man you are; I gave like the man I am."

Our God is generous. His promises are generous. He invites us to ask and he has promised to answer. And when he answers, he gives us more than we desire or deserve. That's who he is. But we are forgetful. We don't expect that much from Him. That's who we are.

We, like Zechariah, are priests who easily forget. In his abundant goodness, God has made us His royal priests through Holy Baptism. In his mercy, God has chosen us as His own possession and set us apart to do priestly work. Work just like Zechariah: to pray, to teach, to proclaim His goodness.

We have every reason to be bold and confident in our prayers. But instead, we wonder, "What good will my prayers do?" We have every reason to be confident in the Lord and in His eternal plan for our salvation. But instead, we doubt that He knows what He's doing. We have every reason to live with joy in all circumstances, knowing that we are beggars who have been granted a kingdom. But instead, we live and think and pray like God is stingy and distant.

We are royal priests of the King of kings. But we expect so little from him. We are like Zechariah. Surrounded by things to reassure us that God remembers. And yet so forgetful of God's goodness.

We forget. But God does remember. He does not forget His promises, and He does not forget His priests. He remembered Zechariah's prayer and acted. God gave Zechariah far more than he expected.

Zechariah hoped for the Messiah... eventually. And God gave the Messiah within Zechariah's own generation. Within his own extended family. Zechariah hoped he might father a child. And boy did God give him a child. A child who became the greatest of all prophets. A child who prepared the way for the Lord.

God remembered Zechariah. And God remembers us. We know he has because he has sent the One to whom John pointed. We know he has because he has sent to us a far greater, more faithful priest than forgetful Zechariah or any of the priests like him.

A priest who would perfectly remember and trust the Father's goodness in our place. A priest who would always have a confident hope in God, even in the most hopeless situations. A priest who would do all this so that His faithfulness might clothe you in your Baptism.

A priest would be not only the most holy priest but also the most holy sacrifice. The Lamb of God sacrificed for you. The Lamb whose blood would atone for all your doubt and mistrust. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, as John himself proclaimed.

Because God has remembered us, we have a "great high priest," as the book of Hebrews says. A great high priest who is not silenced by doubt, as Zechariah was. But one who used His voice mightily to bless, to pray, to instruct, and to gather sinners. And yet, when his faithfulness was called into question, He chose to be silent before His accusers, like a sheep to the slaughter, and go to an unjust death in our place.

He was like Aaron, but greater. Hanging on a cross with arms outstretched like a priest in prayer, uttering the most profound absolution: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He was like Zechariah, but greater. The child of God who always remembers and never forgets His Father's goodness.

We must never forget the people we are. Like Zechariah, we are poor, pitiable beggars, deserving no good thing from the Lord. But we must also never forget who the Lord is: gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

God remembered Zechariah and acted, giving him a son to proclaim the Messiah. God remembers your need for forgiveness and acts, providing it for you in Holy Absolution. He remembers your need for holiness and acts, providing it for you in Holy Baptism. He remembers your need for strength and courage to live with patience and joy and acts, providing it all for you in His Holy Supper.

The season of Advent is a season of remembering. Remembering all that Christ has done for us. Remembering all that Christ still does among us. And remembering all that Christ will do on the last day, when he brings us into His glorious kingdom, beyond anything we can imagine.

In every way, He exceeds our tiny expectations. We ask Him for some comfort from the guilt of his Law, and He gives us double for all our sins. We ask Him to give us a little help in our trials, and He gives us a Kingdom. We ask for help enduring the pain of disease and sickness, and He gives us the promise of full and complete healing in the resurrection on the Last Day.

What child is this who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping? This child is the fulfillment of Zechariah's name: God remembers. This child is the fulfillment of Zechariah's office: the great high priest of God's people. This child is the fulfillment of Zechariah's voice: the one who prays for us, teaches us God's Word, and demonstrates the goodness of the Lord, who blesses his people with eternal life. Amen.