



LESSONS IN LIVING

“The Gift of Silence”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
December 28, 2025

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:8-20 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Now it was the turn of Zechariah's priestly class to serve. And as he was fulfilling his priestly office before God, it fell to him by lot, according to priestly usage, to enter the sanctuary of our God and offer incense. While the full assembly of people was praying outside at the time of day when the incense was offered, an angel of our God appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. Zechariah was deeply disturbed upon seeing the angel, and was overcome with fear. The angel said to him, "Don't be frightened, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, whom you'll name John. He will be your joy and delight and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of our God. He must never drink wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. And he will bring many of the children of Israel back to their God Most High. He will go before God as a forerunner, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the rebellious to the wisdom of the just—to make ready a people prepared for our God." Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife too is advanced in age." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel, who stands before God. I was sent to speak to you and bring you this good news. But because you have not trusted my words, you'll be mute—unable to speak—until the day these things take place. They'll all come true in due season."

Sermon

Strange passage. You agree. It's a strange passage.

One of the things that I think was forgotten by the early church, not by the early church, but the Church that came later, the traditional Church, is that it was a tradition in mystical Judaism to tell fantastical stories that helped you understand the spiritual experience the people were having.

I want to suggest that what we're looking at today is a teaching parable. If it's not, I'm not really interested in it. You can be if you are. But the idea that everything in scripture actually happened

is not very helpful to me. That makes it like an old newspaper, and you're just supposed to believe it without evidence, without proof. I don't see that helping anybody get more loving or wise. But these teaching parables are invaluable. It's kind of shaking us up, stirring us up, so that we can experience what these wise people were experiencing at the time.

One of the things that makes me suspect this is a wisdom story is that the foil in the story is a clergy person. We don't come out well. People of my ilk did not come out well in the gospel stories.

You understand why. It's like if somebody's been to seminary, they probably think they're better than other people. And, they may not be conscious of it, but when you're taught that Greek is a mysterious... You also have this magic language you can speak, Hebrew, Greek. You learn the right interpretation of scripture, which is very strange.

So, you learn this humility. This is all about grace. It's not about me, it's about God. But if you want to be baptized, you've got to come through me. So, it's all about grace, but grace through ordained clergy. So, there's kind of a self-deception that happens. What we need to do is find the good, the wisdom, the loving, the true, and realize we need to outgrow the rest of it.

In ancient Israel, there was a type of prophet called the Nazarene, and they didn't drink. You saw that in the story. John the Baptist isn't going to drink, but they also didn't eat raisins or grapes. They avoided fruits of the vine, because that was the agrarian culture that they thought had led Israel astray. Hunter-gatherer is the way to go. The agrarian thing was seen as this bad mistake. Big cities are a mistake. If you read from start to finish, the Temple was a mistake. Founding a king was a mistake.

But that gets them lost. And so, we lift up these old stories and think they're telling us who we are. And we're trying to look at ourselves through somebody else's eyes. I think that's the condition many people are in. Not only in our time, but that's what this priest is going through. His religion has been about words, about rituals, about practices. He's talked about angels probably his whole life, and all of a sudden there's an angel there, and he's about to fall apart. He talks about miracles, and yet when something miraculous is happening in his own life, he doesn't believe it.

I had the distinct feeling when I was in Sunday school that I'd been given a torch to pass along, whose flame had extinguished generations ago. My teachers were trying to get me to believe in something, and the only reason is because their teachers had told them that. Now, I passionately believe there's a truth and a wisdom that's there in the core story. But to grasp that, we have to let go of the shell that we've been given; to let go of the container. Jesus called that letting go of the wineskin for new wine.

So, Gabriel comes and just sounds like if you don't realize this teaching story, he's just a little bit of a bully. So, I'm going to punish you by taking away your voice. But if it's a teaching story, then consider what lesson would be there for this wordy priest to lose the ability to speak? It's possible that as long as he's talking, he's not going to be able to see the miracle when it happens.

It can be right in front of him and he'll be so full of his own beliefs that he can't see what's happening.

Now, in the Jewish mystical tradition, they tell fantastical miracle stories, but the miracle is an ordinary experience for you and I. We have to realize that the story of Christmas is about a light that is shining in our darkness. It's about a music that's there in our silence. If we take it literally, as I've said almost every Sunday this year, if there are angels on the roof, everybody would have converted. You know what I'm saying? But if there's a music in life, and these people have had the experience of that, and they desperately want you to have that experience, then you're talking about a very different kind of gift.

So, I think what our story is going to call us to is religion that leads us to life, not to more words. To relationship, to love, not to power. I will give my insights, then you can decide whether it feels true or not. If you want to go to heaven with me, then that's... *[laughter]* Actually, I'm not sure Presbyterians go to heaven, so I don't know. *[laughter]* A lot of people on Facebook say I'm not.

One of the most helpful insights I've ever received from any religion anywhere in the world was in the yoga aphorisms, the yoga sutras of a man called Patanjali. He organized the system of yoga. I'd always thought yoga was exercises, just stretching and doing that kind of thing. But in his second aphorism, if I'm remembering correctly, he says, that the purpose of yoga is to still the mind so that you recognize who you truly are. This is what I copied down.

Yoga is the cessation of the movements of the mind. Then there's abiding in the seer's own form.

It's really hard to translate, but it's saying we're born into a story that somebody else gave us, and that's who we think we are.

But our story began with stars in other galaxies. It started with the evolutionary process on Earth. Our stories are very long, very deep, and very broad. We're connected to everything. To me, what religion is, is opening that umbrella, where we can have the full experience of what it means to be a human being in the cosmos.

In the yoga system, as I understand it, we get so distracted by what's happening to us, by what we fear, and what we desire, that we lose contact with who we really are and who other people really are.

I always like the image of the monkey mind, where your mind is just kind of jerking, and you don't realize you're looking through that, and it's obscuring what you're trying to see and feel.

Thich Nhat Hanh is another hero of mine. I won't be mentioning many Presbyterians today, but Thich Nhat Hanh, he says,

There's a radio playing in our head. Radio station NST, nonstop thinking. Our mind is filled with noise, and that's why we can't hear the call of life, the call of love. Our heart is calling us, but we don't hear. We don't have the time to listen to our heart.

Now, in that context, listen to this hymn that we'll be singing a little bit "O Little Town of Bethlehem". Think of Bethlehem as a little snow globe of your mind and your heart, of your consciousness.

*O, Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark street shineth the everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

What an incredible description of an awakening experience! The hopes and fears. One of the things, the gifts of studying the East. In the West, usually heaven is what you desire, hell is what you fear. But both of those are disturbances of your peace. So that idea of balancing what you love and fear, that's what you desire and fear. I think that's part of what Jesus means when he says the word 'love.' That's like to be so attuned to the beauty of a flower that you can both feel its impermanence and also its breathtaking beauty.

So, the first idea, I think, is in the Psalms, it's called "*Be still and know that I'm God.*" Probably the best version of that in Christianity are the Quakers. There are lots and lots of examples of people who instead of praying, meditate. Instead of a religion of talking, it's one of listening. Just something to consider.

The second point is that I think the priest in this story has become a prisoner of his own beliefs, of his own thoughts. How do you get out of that? People started telling you who you were, long before you could really grow into the answer to that question. Can we stop talking and rehearsing what we've been told? And just live fully alive.

The early church founder Irenaeus said, "*The greatest glory to God is a human being fully alive.*" Jesus said, *I've come that you might have life and have it full.* Nothing about the Apostle's Creed. Jesus never saw the Apostle's Creed. He only visited Presbyterian churches on occasion [laughter]. So, just to realize the Church has done a number on Jesus. And I still love the Church, and I still work here. At the same time, I don't want religion to rob you of your own spirit.

A definition of yoga that's supposedly by Patanjali, but I don't trust that part. I like the phrase here, but I have to look up and see if it's really in these sutras. It goes,

Here is in truth, the whole secret of yoga, the science of the soul, the active turnings, the strident vibrations of selfishness, lust, and hate, are to be stilled by meditation, by letting heart and mind dwell in spiritual life, by lifting up the heart to the strong, silent life above, which rests in the stillness of eternal life, love, and needs no harsh vibration to convince it of being true.

Now, what I think is the genius of Patanjali's yoga is every person has their own form, their own practice. For some of you, it may be gardening. For some of you, it may be cooking. For some people, it may actually be religion. But still, the purpose is to find your great self, your larger self, the long story of who you are, not just to your friends and family, but to the cosmos, to the web of life.

The hymn talks about Christ, and from a mystical sense, Christ is not Jesus' last name. Christ is not Jesus with magical powers. Christ is the loving of humankind the way Jesus did. So, that becomes your larger identity. When Paul says that Christ is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, I think he's talking about a mystical state, a sense of unity of humankind as your family.

The way the hymn goes, "*O, Holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.*" Now, in the West, we have this sense that God is this thing outside of us, and we have to beg God to come and save us or to be with us. But in the mystical sense, it's trying to waken us to something that's already there inside of us.

*O, Holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell,
Come to us, abide with us, our Christ Emmanuel.*

And remember Christ means "God is with us." So, you've got "O, come." You've got paradoxes all over the place. "O, come." "God is with us." "There's a light in the darkness." "There's a music on a still, silent night." Very Zen-like. And I think what they're trying to help us understand is it's happening for you and me right now. If we can still the story that's swirling in our head, and settle into who we really are, it's right here. What we're looking for is right here.

The sacred is always in the ordinary.

I don't know if there are magical things that happened in the Bible. I just know that when people die in my life, they stay dead. I just know if somebody walks on water, they sink. So, I think those were teaching stories, too. But I think the magic they're talking about is happening all the time.

There's a light in our darkness, if we'll let our eyes settle. Have you ever come into a room when you've been outside, and it's dark and it looks like there's nothing there? The mind is like that, too. Unfortunately, we're taught to know more about our computers in our cars, than we know about our own minds. Both yoga and mystical Christianity is an invitation to discover who you truly are and to hear a music even in your silence.

I'll close with this verse, because I think it could have been written by any Zen priest or mystic through the ages. This is from "O, Little Town of Bethlehem."

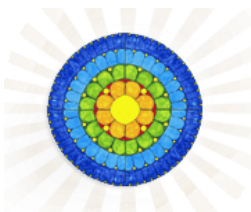
*How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.
So, God imparts to human hearts the blessings of God's heaven.
No ear may hear its coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive it still, the dear Christ enters in."*

Well, that's my struggles with the text. We'll take a moment for you to think how you would have understood this.

Benediction

Thank you so much for sharing what in my line of work they call Death Valley Sunday. *[laughter]* This is very nice to be able to share this with actual people. So thank you for making that time. But If I had a gift to share with people between now and I check out, one of them would be the knowledge that we come from a depth that is much deeper than what happens to us. And so there's a peace and a joy inside us that is always there if we become still, that there's an in whatever storm we have to face. So as you go out into this week, hopefully it will be a good week. But if not, if things are not going well, remember to get still. Remember that the sacred is always with you when you are here. Go in peace.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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