

I remember when I saw her for the first time. She'd come early to the high school youth group that night, not wanting to arrive at the same time as everyone else, but not wanting to arrive after everything had started either. Still, she was taking a chance by coming early. She came into our meeting room and walked straight over to the couch in the corner, taking a seat and curling her feet up under her.

She'd been part of our youth group for about two years at that point, but this was her first night coming as a girl. Her dad had talked to me about it, so I was expecting to see her like this—though I hadn't been prepared for how drastic the change would be. Last week: floppy, straight dark hair, athletic shorts, and a plain t-shirt; this week: bleached-blond ringlet curls, eye and lip color, a polka-dotted dress, and Mary Jane sandals.

The congregation is committed to LGBTQIA2S+ affirmation. That was part of the reason her parents had started attending; they trusted, during and after her coming out, this would be a safe space for her. I trusted it, too. But I was nervous about how the group would react to seeing this friend they'd known as a boy last week, so changed.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. I looked at her. "Are you ready?" She nodded, but her eyes betrayed her nervousness.

The door swung open, and on the other side stood the kid I'd been most worried about. He was a nice enough guy, but pretty traditional, and I honestly didn't know how he would react. The two of them were friends, it seemed to me; they'd pair up sometimes for games, and talked easily with each other. But I could tell by the look on her face she hadn't told him about this. She sucked in her breath.

He paused when he saw her, his feet fixed in the doorway. His eyes grew wide. He took her in—the dress, the shoes, the make-up. I silently willed him to be kind. Gentle. A friend. After a few moments, he shook his head and grinned big. "Ah, wow," he said slowly, admiringly. "I...I could never go blonde."

Of all the things he could have said, he somehow landed on the perfect one. He applauded her courage without making her uncomfortable. He acknowledged she was someone new and still spoke to her as an old friend. He could sense the tension in the air and cut it with generous humor.

She exhaled. I did, too. This was going to be alright.

I could see his reaction gave her courage. She sat up straighter. He said, “I mean... really!” and came to sit down next to her on the couch. She touched her curls and laughed.

The other youth arrived, a few at a time, until the group was assembled. They had questions. They wanted to know about her hair, about her chosen name, about how long she had known she was trans. She had been kind of a shy kid before, but she came alive, telling this story. They didn’t all know exactly what to say or how to phrase the questions forming in their minds, but she could tell their curiosity was kind-spirited, and she was patient with them. We let this conversation take the time it needed, then moved on to listening to other youth share their highs and lows of the past week.

Watching these youth receive each other, listening to them give voice to their identities and understandings and experiences, I was reminded of the power we all have to help those around us live into who God has called us to be. After the birth of his son, Zechariah’s bottled-up song spills from him—remembering and celebrating God’s faithfulness to the people, blessing and commissioning this tiny one for a life of prophetic witness. After recounting his father’s blessing, scripture tells us John “grew, and became strong in spirit.” How much of that strength came from that early love song echoing in his bones?

There are times when our reality is almost unbelievable—too horrible, too wonderful, too astonishing—and we lose our capacity to give voice to it. There are times words aren’t what’s called for; times when silence, or touch, or simple presence does the work of care and connection better than words can. And there are times we think we might be speechless, only to sense God has a blessing, a liberating word, to speak through us, to a friend, a child, someone—just like all of us—finding their way.

Reflection Questions

1. Tell a story of a time you’ve witnessed, or participated in, a loving affirmation.
2. Have you ever been speechless or unsure of the “right thing” to say? What is that like for you?
3. Are there words—a scripture verse, a song lyric, a note from a friend—that you turn to again and again for courage, strength, or care?
4. Where do you hear hope, peace, joy, and love in Zechariah’s song?
5. How are you called to give voice to love this season?