

12/15/24**The Tender Mercy of Our God
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On the afternoon of April 11th, 1970, three astronauts lifted off from Kennedy Space Center in Houston, Texas, on a mission that was supposed to take them to the moon. They never got there. They never made it. And if you're familiar with the film "Apollo 13", you might understand why. On the second day of the mission, an oxygen tank in the ship's service module exploded, causing a loss of electric power, a loss of breathing air, and a loss of the drinking water deemed necessary to ensure the astronauts' survival. The mission was aborted. The lunar plans were scrapped. All of the attention now centered on how to get these astronauts back home to their families, their wives, and their children — all those who cared about them. The next four days turned into an around the clock 24-hour rescue operation, with Mission Control working tirelessly with the astronauts to not only change their course of direction, but limit what resources they had, to ensure they would return in time. With virtually no food or water, with little heat traveling through space's cold and unforgiving frontier, the astronauts of Apollo 13 didn't know if they were going to survive, much less if their bodies would ever make it back to return to the dust of the earth from whence they came.

You would think that the explosion itself, or the hunger, or the sleepless nights stressing about how they were going to make it with the very limited resources they had, was the most frightened these astronauts would ever become throughout this whole ordeal. It was not. Something else was. In fact, it was the only part of the mission that seemed to go right.

You see, back then, there was this procedure called "blackout", and it was routine for every spaceflight. As the spacecraft traveled back to earth and entered into the earth's atmosphere, it would get so hot outside that all radio waves would be temporarily cut off; they would be dead for a few moments, usually between three or four minutes. All communication between the astronauts and Mission Control would cease, and there would be silence.

In Apollo 13's case, the blackout lasted longer than was typical: over six minutes, six minutes and twenty-three seconds to be exact. Six minutes and twenty-three seconds of complete silence as the spaceship plummeted back to earth in a freefall. After

everything that had gone wrong with the mission, and all the work that had been done to rescue these men and return them back to earth safely, six minutes and twenty-three seconds of silence was the difference between life and death — peril, and ultimately salvation. All the astronauts could do in that moment was sit and wait, without any way of knowing how it was going on the outside. Silence. They waited in silence.

That was the most afraid Fred Haise said he was during the mission, he said in a later interview. He described how he “entered a phase of deep depression” in those moments, as he waited in agony in a silence that seemed to last forever. It was when their rescue was most “imminent” he said, most “attainable,” that he and the other astronauts were most afraid. Six minutes and twenty-three seconds of silence as they waited for news of their survival from Mission Control.

Imagine what that must have been like. And now imagine the silence of God for four hundred years. That’s the amount of time that elapsed between the end of the Old Testament age, and the birth of the Messiah, Jesus. Four hundred years, four hundred years of silence, waiting, with all communication seemingly cut off. The prophets were gone; no new revelation had been shared. Four hundred years of grasping for the salvation of the world, and it was just out of reach. It wasn’t time.

I imagine this is when the Israelites were most afraid, most afraid in their story. Isaiah said the Savior would be called Emmanuel, God with us, but where was God now? “Wonderful Counselor!” “Mighty God!” “Everlasting Father!” “Prince of Peace!” But there was no peace, just a sword, a Roman sword. Violence and bloodshed. The darkness of sin clouded God’s people and their vision for a future once again. The prophecies were there, the rescue mission had started, the Savior was already promised to come, but now as the Israelites were as close as they’d ever been to truly “tasting and seeing that the Lord was good”, all they felt was the agony of waiting, and silence. Silence. In the midst of their fear, all they could do was wait on the Lord, and hope He responded. “Houston, do you read?”

Brothers and sisters, the season of Advent is our opportunity to participate in Israel’s waiting, to remember what it was like and feel it, to wait for the Lord in anxious anticipation for the “good news of great joy which shall be unto all people” to arrive. The coming of the Messiah is God’s response to Israel’s waiting, and its silence. It’s God’s response to our waiting, too. We also anticipate the coming of Jesus, but only a second

time. We wait just as the Israelites did. They sat in silence as they awaited the good news that was promised the first time; we wait in silence for Jesus to return. Advent is a season, brothers and sisters, whereby remembering the plight of God's people, and the hope, peace, joy, and love that came to them as a result of the Christ child, that we are filled with a holy longing for an abundance of more — a future we know will surely come to us, if only we persevere by faith. Christ shall come again and God will make all things new. We believe that. Pain and suffering will be no more, every tear will be wiped away from every eye, the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will make the darkness and the silence of our waiting disappear in an instant. Advent is a season where we remember the silence, so that the joy of our hearts might burst forth in singing at the moment when Christ comes again to break it.

There is one character in the Christmas story who knows a little thing or two about waiting, and silence. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. When he and his wife, Elizabeth, were barren because of their age, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah in the Temple, and declared that they would have a son. This is the child whom the prophet Malachi spoke about. He said: "He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (*Luke 1:16-17*). This child was to go before the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the world, and prepare the way for Him. In a sense, the angel was saying, "Behold the time has come. The silence of Israel and the waiting will soon be no more." God was about to move, and this child was to announce it. He was to announce to God's people that their waiting and their fear were over.

But Zechariah didn't believe it, at least, not at first. He said, "How can I be sure of this?" (*Luke 1:18*). "How can I be sure?" Just like God's people prove again and again in the pages of Scripture, when God declares He is doing a new thing, there is doubt. The consequences for Zechariah's doubt are severe: "And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time" (*Luke 1:20*). Silence, brothers and sisters; God's punishment for Zechariah's doubt is silence. As the anticipation grew, and the days wore on, inching closer and closer to the arrival of his son and the arrival of God's promised

Messiah King, Zechariah had to wait in silence, unable to speak until the exact moment when God decided it was time to move.

In many ways, Zechariah is the embodiment of Israel's struggle, the personification of four hundred years of silence, just waiting in that most terrified period between when God's promises are given, and when they are fulfilled. Brothers and sisters, we live in that period once again on this side of the cross and this side of the empty tomb. The prophecies have been given, the glorious hope of new life and resurrection has already been won for us by Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, but yet, we wait in silence, longing for the day when our faith is turned to sight. We live in a world that doesn't always look like the reality of God's Kingdom, and that's an understatement. There are wars and rumors of wars, there is economic exploitation, the poor are scorned. Human life is often seen as a commodity to be sold, not a precious jewel to cherish. We live in the silence, just waiting for the day when Christ returns and God says, "It's time." "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD..." but they aren't here yet, not fully, not yet. So we wait, and we sit, in a silence that sometimes feels deafening, insurmountable (*Jeremiah 33:14*).

But just like Zechariah, we have reason to hope. We serve a God who does not return empty on His Word. His promises are trustworthy and true; they do not fail. In Zechariah's story, the appointed time the angel spoke about eventually did come to pass, and John was born, even in the midst of Zechariah and Elizabeth's old age, just like God said he would. Just like their forefather, Isaac, was born so many centuries prior to Abraham and Sarah in the midst of their barrenness. And just as Isaac made a way, so did John the Baptist, in the salvation plan of the world. Isaac made a way for the creation of Israel's people, God's chosen nation. John made a way by proclaiming a message of repentance and preparing the way for God to redeem them. The Prophet Isaiah declared that "the voice of one crying in the wilderness" will say, "Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (*Isaiah 40:3*). John made the way that prepared God's people for Jesus. John cried, "He is the one." "I baptize you with water for repentance, but after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (*Matthew 3:11*). John made a way, and God broke Israel's silence. He broke Zechariah's silence, too.

After John was born, Zechariah spoke, well actually, he sang. After nine months of waiting, after nine months of silence, after nine months of anxious anticipation and fear, Zechariah's emotions finally bubbled over into a single song of praise. His silence literally makes way for joyful singing, a hymn of sweet music to God. And the significance of this moment is not lost to Zechariah. He understands the magnitude of his experience. He understands that the miracle of his son's birth is not only a miracle for him, but for all of God's people. When Zechariah bursts out into song, God has not only quelled his own silence, but Israel's as well. Indeed the whole world's. Listen to this song:

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all those who hate us – to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

“And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.” (*Luke 1:68-79*)

Brothers and sisters, you may not know it, but today is Gaudete Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent. Gaudete, in Latin, literally means “rejoice,” so I can't think of a more appropriate passage in all of Scripture to reflect on this day. We light the pink candle on the Advent wreath for a reason; there's something different about this day. Today we're encouraged to rejoice, to make music in praise and gratitude of God because He quells the silence. He turns our silence into singing, by His marvelous and tender mercy. Though the silence of our waiting may still feel deafening at times, there is still reason to sing, because our God is greater. The fact that God quelled Israel's silence by sending Jesus the first time is enough to remind us that He has the power to do it again, and He

will. Zechariah says “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, (as he said through his holy prophets long ago)” (*Luke 1:68-70*). May we sing that song as well, brothers and sisters, for by doing so, it can inspire our faith. This world is dark; life is dark. It is silent. It is cold. Apart from God, it has no hope. But, brothers and sisters, in the midst of the darkness, a light has shined, and the darkness can’t overcome it. It’s still flickering. It’s still out there. And it promises to make its way back to us, more blinding and glorious than ever before. We just have to wait and experience the silence.

Zechariah ends his song on a profound cliffhanger, a future prophecy of his own. “Because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven,” those “living in darkness” and experiencing the “shadow of death,” on them a light will shine. Their “feet” will be guided into the “path of peace,” he says (*Luke 1:78-79*). And why? Because the way of the Savior, Jesus, is left open and available to them; all may enter in. Because of the tender mercy of God, **in** the silence, the way John made for Jesus is still available for you and me. If we repent and believe the good news that Jesus came before, and, therefore, we can know He is coming again, we will be saved. The path of peace made known to us by the light is still walkable, even if what we hear still sounds a lot like silence. Because of the tender mercy of our God, brothers and sisters, we have reason to hope, we have reason for peace, we have reason to love, and we have reason to rejoice, even as the silence still seems deafening, and it’s all we hear. Merry Christmas, brothers and sisters, and may the Lord be with you. Let’s pray:

Our God, who is so rich and tender in mercy, you are our light in our darkness, the song of our hearts in the midst of our silence and fear. May you grant us endurance as we wait for the coming of our Savior, and use the memory of His birth this season to inspire us to prepare for His return. We live in a world that’s so enslaved to fear, but in You there is hope. May this hope penetrate our silence, and create a joyful noise of praise and thanksgiving. May you remind us that you are always there. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, we pray, for we long to see Your face. In this world of suffering, may You make way for peace. Amen.

Questions for Discussion & Reflection:

1. What was your immediate reaction to the story of the astronauts on Apollo 13? How did their story of waiting in silence strike you?
2. Have you ever found yourself anxiously waiting for God to move in your life, and had to endure silence? What was that like?
3. Did you know that Advent is a season in the church calendar that historically not only celebrates Jesus' first coming at Christmas, but his second coming at the end of the age? How might this shift the way you understand what it means to celebrate Christmas?
4. As we await the second coming of the Savior, do you find yourself able to empathize and relate to the Israelites' struggle as they waited for his birth?
5. After God broke the silence of Israel's waiting, Zechariah sang for joy. Have you ever experienced seasons of waiting, followed by immense seasons of joy and thanksgiving to God? What was that like?
6. What does it mean to you that God's mercy is described as "tender"? Does that alter the prevailing image you hold about the nature and character of God? Why or why not?
7. How might the memory of God's tender mercy sending Jesus the first time encourage you as we await in silence for him to return?