

"It will be enough for your pain make to you more aware of the pain of others - to respond to them and give them a reason for hope."

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A Song of Hope that We Might Be Signs of God's Kin-dom, Luke 1:67-79

Luke 1:67-79

*Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:
"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

Seen on Facebook: a truck with a sign "Learning stick, sorry for the delay." Having learned to drive in an old pickup truck with a sticky clutch, boy, do I wish I had thought of a sign like that on my first trip across town, where I stalled the engine at every stop sign. It's not the only time I wish I could wear a sign to encourage a little bit more patience and compassion. "Be gentle, baby in NICU," would have been helpful a few years ago. Or one in my first years of ministry, "New pastor; occasionally says dumb things." Right? Wouldn't it be nice to wear a sign that just spells it out so you don't have to? "Getting a divorce." "Halfway through chemo." "My kid's in a psych ward." The kind of sign that says, "Look, the rug was just ripped out from under my feet, and I'm trying to get my bearings. Give me time and space and kindness." But it doesn't work that way, we can't wear signs that tell people what's happening. We can't wear a sign, but we can be a sign.

By the time Zechariah was at the temple in Jerusalem, hearing the words of an angel, I'm sure he could have acquired any number of signs - about his and his wife Elizabeth's infertility, about his aging body, about being a devout and persecuted Jew under Roman rule. The angel could have been gentler with him, especially when his words of disbelief were certainly loaded with grief. But the angel strikes Zechariah mute. I confess there is a gap here, a space where I have so many questions. Most of all, was Zechariah struck mute because he was indifferent to the suffering of others? Was Zechariah's imposed silence a chance for him to observe the pain and healing of others?

In my life, I have noticed that, when people go through traumatic and tragic situations, at some point in time, they are presented with a choice. They come upon some else who is experience a traumatic or tragic situation. Now, they can - and many do - use their own experience to be judgmental of others, to expect that others will walk the same road to healing at the same pace. And, so, they use their pain to justify taking lightly the pain of others. They can become cantankerous, angry, rude. But, sometimes, they let their pain open them to others. They can make pain the water that grows their compassion. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way, "If you flee from the pain and failure, then you run into them everywhere you go. If you can find some way to open to them instead, then they may bring their hands from behind their backs and lay flowers on your bed."

Having a child would never change the pain of the loss Zechariah had already experienced. It doesn't work that way. It is not a given in this story that the birth of John the Baptist would restore Zechariah's faith or hope. So what opened him up to the possibility of hope? What is the heart of the compassion in his song? It is, I think the silence. Mary Oliver famously describes prayer as a "silence into which another voice may speak." Without the silence, would Zechariah have noticed his wife's excitement? Would he have had heard his cousin Mary's song? Is it precisely in hearing the hope of these faithful women, of seeing their healing and compassion, that Zechariah is allowed to give birth to his own hope and compassion? The mystic and theologian Henri Nouwen says, "Ministry means the ongoing attempt to put one's own search for God, with all the moments of pain and joy, despair and hope, at the disposal of those who want to join this search but do not know how." Zechariah is ready to turn his sign of pain into a sign for God's kin-dom.

Beloved of God, you have this same opportunity. There is no life on earth that is free from pain, but the pain you experience can be an opportunity to be the sign that "the tender mercy of God is breaking up on us." C.S. Lewis calls pain "God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Pay attention to the pain in your life. You do not need to turn your pain into some lesson learned, some deep instruction, or some exhortation to faithful living. It will be enough for your pain make to you more aware of the pain of others - to respond to them and give them a reason for hope. At the end, that is what Zechariah's song is about: that the "dawn is breaking on those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death." Amen.