

“Our World in Stories: Hidden Stories”  
Luke 1:5-24, 67-80

“On October 1, 2015, a twenty-six-year-old student at Umpqua Community College (UCC) walked into his morning writing and composition class and began shooting...” 2015 Umpqua Community College Mass Shooting. Unfortunately, this kind of story is not that unusual in our time. It seems like we are stuck in a loop that repeats itself. But today I would like to tell you of a courageous way this community in Oregon dealt with the pain of their tragedy. Mark Yaconelli was invited to help the community recover from the tragedy through storytelling. He said, “The stories composed by the national media in the days following the tragedy were wearily familiar. Gun rights versus gun restrictions. The decline of mental health services. Tragic (at times explosive) profiles of victims.” As Mark made his way to the campus, he stopped by the classroom where the shooting took place. At the door were roses that were placed there by Chris Mintz, one of the students wounded in the shooting. “A young father and Iraq war veteran, he had run toward the shooting rather than away. After directing students in nearby classes to evacuate, he placed his body against the door of the classroom to keep the shooter from exiting...Miraculously, none of (his) wounds were fatal. Released from the hospital, Mintz returned to the site with ten flowers, nine white for the victims and one red rose, for the shooter.” This made Mark reflect in his mind on the stories which the shooter had filled his mind with about his worth, his need for revenge, and other delusional ways of seeing the world which he found online through other isolated young men like him. He wondered, “What if the shooter had been given other stories that helped him express the hurt he felt? What if he had been told stories by groups of men who had transformed their own pain and alienation, men who had found friendship and community through heroic acts of service? I wondered about the story this shooter and other violent young men are communicating about our society, about growing up male, about the ways men are formed.”

The hidden stories of our pain are so important to bring to the forefront. Discovering the people who are hurting in our lives and in our society and helping them to express their pain as part of the larger story of life can bring a lot of healing to our communities.

In our Bible story for this week, we turn to a silent figure. This is the part of the Christmas story that we often neglect or mention quickly. It is the story of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptizer. His story is often not seen as the focus. He is just a means to an end. He is just a small part of the Christmas story. But what we tend to forget is that his role in shaping the ministry of Jesus was huge. He is the one who raised John, the cousin of Jesus, who also became his mentor. His faith and his practice of serving God as a priest were foundational for preparing the way for Jesus.

Zechariah was an unlikely figure in this story. He and his wife, Elizabeth, were too old to have children. That is why he was skeptical of the vision he received that he was going to have a child. He needed to stay silent so he could really get the mystery of the story that was unfolding in his life.

We meet him in the temple in Luke 1:5-24

<sup>5</sup>In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup>Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. <sup>7</sup>But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

<sup>8</sup>Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, <sup>9</sup>he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. <sup>10</sup>Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. <sup>11</sup>Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. <sup>13</sup>But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup>You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup>for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>16</sup>He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' <sup>18</sup>Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' <sup>19</sup>The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. <sup>20</sup>But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

<sup>21</sup>Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. <sup>22</sup>When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. <sup>23</sup>When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

<sup>24</sup>After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, <sup>25</sup>'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

After several months of silence, Zechariah spoke, and his words brought blessings to many. He had a long time to ponder and to go inwardly. Out of his silence came a great song of praise. Let's listen to his words of praise.

Luke 1:67-80

<sup>67</sup> Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

<sup>68</sup> ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.  
<sup>69</sup> He has raised up a mighty savior for us  
in the house of his servant David,  
<sup>70</sup> as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,  
<sup>71</sup> that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.  
<sup>72</sup> Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant,  
<sup>73</sup> the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,  
to grant us <sup>74</sup> that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear, <sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness  
before him all our days.  
<sup>76</sup> And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
<sup>77</sup> to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins.  
<sup>78</sup> By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon<sup>[h]</sup> us,  
<sup>79</sup> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.’

<sup>80</sup> The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

I love the example of Zechariah because he shows us that often, the people who are silent have incredible gifts to share with the world. Those who may seem to have nothing to say, have the greatest gems for our faith. Those on the margins have important stories to share with us.

We are invited today to consider the stories that come to us from silence, our own or the silence of others. How does the story of Zechariah inspire you to seek hidden stories? Who are the people or groups that often suffer in silence and who could enrich our world through their stories? How might we let their stories shape our world?

The words of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) Brief Statement of Faith seem especially relevant in these days of unrest and divisions, especially at it relates to Palestine and Israel. I’ve been thinking about this part of the statement a lot the last few days:

In a broken and fearful world  
the Spirit gives us courage  
to pray without ceasing,  
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,  
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,

to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,  
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

And so we pray for the Spirit to stir us and to help us to live this challenging and amazing calling. We pray that we may:

—pray  
—witness  
—unmask  
—hear  
—and work. Amen.