

One of the most profound aspects of the creation poem in Genesis 1 is that God creates the world through words. God said, "Let there be light" and there was light. Now, if we approach this text not as a literal, chronological history, but instead as Hebrew poetry that is revealing to us what it means to be human, then this poem hums with meaning. Because it's not only God who creates the world with words, we do as well. The language that we speak creates the world we inhabit, giving shape and form to our existence, which begs the question, what kind of world do you want to live in? Do you want to live in a world where tenderness and mercy are our foundation or competition and worthiness? You can't have it both ways.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are one of many couples in the Bible who suffer from infertility. Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob, Leah, and Rachel; Hannah and Elkanah, there are many people in the pages of scripture who know this pain. For many of you, this hits close to home. Whether it's reproductive problems, miscarriage, child loss, legal, social, and financial barriers to having children, there are many variations on the details, yet the pain is quite common. Compounding that pain is the shame that comes with infertility. That shame still exists for many today, but in the ancient world, childless couples carried a disgrace that is difficult for us to understand.

Now, if the foundation of our world is competition and worthiness, what does infertility say about Zechariah and Elizabeth? I suppose it says they don't measure up. They haven't been able to fulfill this most basic biological impulse, to reproduce. At best they are failures, and at worst they've done something wrong to bring about their fate. If competition and worthiness are our foundation, then Zechariah and Elizabeth are unworthy losers. But that's not what scripture says. When Luke introduces them to us in verse 6, he says, "Both of them were righteous before God...But they had no children." Did you hear that? They were righteous long before the angel Gabriel shows up with a surprise birth announcement. They are already cherished by God. Having no children said nothing about their value in God's sight.

Could it be that Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in a world whose foundation is tenderness and mercy? Could it be that we do too? Here's the truth my friends, you are already whole and beloved of God, whether you fulfill society's expectations or not. Tenderness sees beauty in everyone. Mercy looks upon those who've not measured up and says, "You are beloved, no matter what you've done or left undone." You come into this world pre-approved. If the God you believe in is constantly reminding you of all the ways you fall short, then it's time for an upgrade to your operating system. Because God is tenderer than we've been led to believe, but that can be difficult to accept.

Even Zechariah thinks God's tenderness is too good to be true. When the angel Gabriel shows up and tells him he will have a son, Zechariah responds, "How will I know this is true?" Gabriel says, I'm going to give you 9 months to think about that, and he strikes Zechariah mute until the baby is born. I think that's both hilarious and illuminating. It tells us that if we are looking for certainty when it comes to faith, we won't have much to say. But if we learn to listen, to close our mouths, open our hearts, and wait, we will witness the boundless mercy of God.

Against all odds and reason, Elizabeth has a child, Luke says "by the mercy of God." And when it was time to name this child, family and friends say, he should be named after his father. Elizabeth says, no, we're gonna call him John, but they don't listen to her. They go to Zechariah, and he confirms she's right: "His name is John" and all of them were amazed. For a

man to de-center himself and his family name in the patriarchal world of ancient Israel was nothing short of amazing. Often, it's only when we get out of our own way that we can witness the wonder of God's work in our midst. When Zechariah resists the religious and cultural expectations placed upon him, and de-centers himself, only then is he able to speak. And my what a speech he gives!

[Display Berakah for the rest of the sermon]

The first words out of his mouth, after 9 months of silence, is a prophetic song that he sings over his son. How many of you had parents who sang to you? How many of your fathers sang you love songs as a child? I suppose it's not a traditionally masculine thing to do, such a tender gift of vulnerability. I was blessed to have two parents who sang to me. There was a whole repertoire they would go through, but my favorite was when my dad would sing, "Little man, you've had a busy day. I know why you're crying. I know why your blue. Someone took your bicycle away. Better go to sleep now, little man you've had a busy day." That song taught me that crying and sadness are all part of growing up, and nothing to be ashamed of, that my exhaustion and grief mattered. What a great foundation he laid for me!

Zechariah sings of God's covenant and mercy to Israel. You see, John is born into a story larger than himself, one full of history, ancestors, promises, and responsibilities. In fact, we all are. This is part of the great loss of meaning in our modern world. The only story we tell our children now is that they are here to be happy, and to achieve, but we have very little sense that we are part of anything larger than our own wants and desires, and that's too small of a story for us. When we are the center of our own story, the result isn't happiness but despair. We all long to be part of something bigger, and the good news is that we are. That's why you're here, to remember that you are a part of a story that is better than the one our modern world tells us. We've been born for more than achievement and consumption. You're here to give and receive mercy.

Zechariah sings about the savior, as though he has already come, even though Jesus is not yet born. He's so sure of God's promises that he speaks and acts as though they have already come to pass. We are invited to do the same. God has given us the power to speak this world into existence. The truth is, we already live in a world where mercy reigns, where forgiveness is stronger than judgment, and where strength is demonstrated not by toughness but tenderness. The closing words of Zechariah's song take my breath away:

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.

These words lay the foundation of John's life. They create the world that he inhabits. It's a world of tenderness, mercy, and peace. We are all welcome to join that world as well. Did you know that God is tender? Too many of us have settled for an image of God that badly needs upgrading. The angry god, who's always disappointed with us, the judgmental god chomping at the bit to pour out wrath. I've lost patience with such puny gods. Father Greg Boyle says, "Here

is the Good News: The God we most deeply want IS the God we actually have.” The Tender One holds us close and sings love songs to us as we fall to sleep.

Do you ever feel like a failure? I do. Do you ever tell yourself you should be doing more, having more success, messing up less? Me too. But here’s the thing, the words we speak create the world we inhabit—ours and those around us. And I don’t know about you, but I want to live in the world of God’s tender mercy. When we speak that world, to ourselves, to those around us, then it becomes the world we live in. I want to invite you to do something vulnerable. Right now, would you place your hand over your heart and close your eyes? Just try it. Here these words from God to you: You are already whole and beloved of God, just as you are. Now, say it to yourself: I am already whole and beloved of God, just as I am. Receive the tenderness mercy of God as both your birthright and destiny.