

There are two things that come to mind when I consider the Canticle of Zechariah. The first is to note why Zechariah's lips were sealed. The angel Gabriel brought a promise from God, and Zechariah questioned whether it was possible. Why the presence of an angel was believable but birth in old age was not, I don't know. So Zechariah was struck mute and he couldn't say a thing until he named his son John and then burst into song. The second is to note, when his tongue was finally released, what he said. "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."

I wonder if maybe we might need to hear these words particularly now. There seems to be so much to cause us to retreat into fear - which of course is what Zechariah was doing - and it seems that what is being said is often neither helpful nor useful.

I know it takes courage to open one's mouth, particularly when what is to be said might cause dyspepsia at the Christmas dinner table.

But God does not call us to fear. God calls us to courage - courage in the knowledge of promises of God.

You see, to know the heart of God is to know how God relates to what God has made. The story of the Bible as it unfolds is the story of God's tender mercy to what God has made.

After the flood, God made a covenant never to despair of humanity to the point of wiping the slate clean again. Twentieth century theologian Karl Barth says that this is *the* defining moment when God decided to be, forevermore, irrevocably, on the side of humanity.

In order to live into the fullness of this promise, God called one family – Abraham and Sarah - to a new way of life, a way of life of following God and making God’s nature known to all they encountered.

Some would say the Bible is the story of how God keeps promises. Genesis is the story of keeping of that promise.

And then God made another promise – when the descendants of Abraham and Sarah were enslaved under the heel of the Egyptians – God decided to save them. God called Moses, and Moses (after some fits and starts – a lesson to us all) led God’s people with his sister and brother into the freedom of the Promised Land. And along the way, God made another promise, *to be the God of this whole people*. We see this covenant in the Ten Commandments. Exodus through Deuteronomy are the stories of God keeping that promise. They are, in Judaism, called the Torah, though the word doesn’t adequately translate into English when we call it the “Law”. It’s not adequate because the story of God’s engagement with God’s people, the Torah, has *two* dimensions: salvation and obligation, story and stipulation.<sup>1</sup>

Later as the rabbis considered these dimensions of faithfulness to the law, they came up with two words in the Talmud that characterize this faithfulness: *haggada* and *halaka*.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernhard Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament 4<sup>th</sup> edition. (Prentice-Hall, Englewood, 1986) p534

*Haggada* is the obligation to tell the story. *Halaka* is the obligation or go in the way of God.<sup>2</sup>

The whole bible is the story of the tender mercy of our God - indeed, the new covenant of Jesus Christ, is our grafting into the promise of God.

Our response is to *tell* and to *go*.

Paul gets that when he writes to the Philippians: “this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

*Haggada* and *halaka*... telling and going.

Speaking truth can be terrifying.

Speaking truth can have consequences.

Listen to this story that Brian Blount shares about the consequences of faithfulness as he tells the story of would-be slave preacher James Smith: “He was finally received into the church and baptized. Not long after this, he felt loudly called upon to go out and labor for the salvation of souls among the slave population with whom he was identified. At this conduct his master was much displeased, and strove to prevent him from the exercise of what the slave considered to be his duty to God and his brethren, on the Sabbath day. He was sometimes kept tied all day Sundays while the other slaves were allowed to go just where they pleased on that day. At other times he was flogged until his blood would drip down at his feet, and yet he would not give up laboring whenever he could get

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

an opportunity, on the Sabbath day, for the conversion of souls. God was pleased to bless his labors and many were led to embrace the Saviour under his preaching.

At length his master sold him to a slave trader, who separated him from his family and carried him to the State of Georgia. His parting words to his wife were that if they proved faithful to God, He would bring them together again in a more free land than Virginia.”<sup>3</sup>

The hoped-for reunion did occur in Canada seventeen years later.

Speaking truth can have consequences.

*Haggada* and *halaka*: Telling, and going.

What is keeping our tongues bound? What are we going to say when our mouths are opened?

Faith, at its heart, is the trust that God will be God.

Let me tell you a couple of stories of trust in God.

They occurred in, of all places, a Presbytery Council meeting. Now I should preface this by saying I am a deep believer in the principle of Presbytery, but I wouldn't go so far as to say I typically approach Presbytery Council meetings with the expectation that I will encounter examples of moral courage.

So as our committee met, we had with us a pastor from Cuba who came bringing us greetings on behalf of the Presbyterian Church there. He shared that he is the pastor of three churches and two missions. Sundays, he said, are an exercise in mobility, beginning with breakfast with one church, lunch with the next, and dinner in the third. In fact, he went on, most of his life is an exercise in mobility between the churches and the

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<sup>3</sup> John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 276-77.

missions, and he concluded by saying, “Before, our countries were not friendly, but now they are friendly and I can be with you, and I ask for your prayers. There are many changes going on, so many changes. We don’t know what is going to happen next, our economy is bad, and so I ask for your prayers.”

*Haggada and halaka... telling, and going.*

A few minutes later we heard from the New Church Development staffer, who said, “Surely you’ve seen all of the press coverage on refugees; it’s pretty much impossible to miss, and I’m sure you all remember that we are right around the corner from the most diverse square mile in the United States – because Clarkston, Georgia, is where a great number of refugees from all over the world come to settle because they can get jobs at the chicken processing plant. But,” she went on, “What you may *not* know is that the Presbyterian Church had wonderful, effective missionaries years ago in Burma, which is now Myanmar.”

She went on, “And so, when the refugees come from Burma, they get off the bus, and see the Presbyterian Church in Clarkston, and they say, ‘Oh! Presbyterians! It is so good to see some family!’”

*Haggada and Halaka – telling and going.*

God is calling you to courage, and God is calling me to courage, but God is not calling us to live each other’s calling – God is calling us to bear with one another and to come to this table as the living of that faith in all its fullness.

God is not is not calling you to be a pastor in Cuba. But God *does* call you to bear with that pastor.

God is not calling you to be a refugee in Georgia, but God *does* call you to bear with that refugee.

God is not calling me to be a slave preacher, but God *is* calling me to bear witness to that preacher's calling and his faithfulness to remembering God's promises.

I can think of no more certain way to be miserable than to seek to live someone else's calling. But I can also think of no more certain way to be *faithful* than to live your own. And in living your own calling, in living courageously into the fullness of what God has called *you* to do and be, you will find that place where, in the words of Frederick Buechner, the world's deep hunger and your deep gladness meet.

This table, where Jesus Christ calls us, is the table of remembrance. It is the table of remembering God's promises and God's covenants. Indeed, it is the table of the New Covenant where God feeds us in order to bring us to the meeting place of deep hunger and deep gladness.

Anne Lamott tells the story of setting up a Sunday School class in her church for the benefit of the one child who needed it, her son. She begins her story, "I did not mean to help start a Sunday School, and did not have a speck of confidence that I could do so. I have only mediocre self-esteem when I am doing things that I am good at or that don't require any self-esteem. I grow anxious on my way to the dump with a carful of garbage, convinced that my garbage and I will be rejected, either because I am throwing out perfectly good stuff, or because it is so disgusting that the people who run a dump wouldn't want it."

She then tells the story of the progression of her journey – and friends, if you have ever been involved in Sunday School you could write this story – you could write of the

anxieties of not thinking you *knew* enough. You could write of the frustrations of volunteers that didn't emerge or goldfish that ran out, or crises of confidence that leave you wondering if everybody questioned your competence.

Sunday School is not for the faint of heart.

But when she had chronicled her journey and the successes and failures along the way, she ended with this story that captures the heart of what we share with the whole world when we come to this table when she tells the story of a day at the beach for her Sunday School.

“The kids went in. They yelped as the cold water covered them, and they splashed and screamed and shoved one another a little more roughly than they had in my dream of this day. Still, as I watched them being cuffed by the breaking waves, submerged, missing for a moment, then reappearing, spluttering, laughing, I thought of what this dream had taken: all those times we teachers had had to ask for help, and had plugged away without nearly enough resources, without knowing how, or whether, we were going to manage. And it had taken much more letting go and trusting than we had felt capable of. I remember getting knocked around in these waves when I was young, and how it felt when grown-ups picked you up and tossed you into the air or the water, exciting and scary all at once, and you knew you would always be caught.”<sup>4</sup>

By the tender mercy of God, may our lips be unsealed. May we tell, and go, in the way that God has called us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Lamott, Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith (New York: Riverhead, 2005) pp77-78