

Salvation Has Come To This House

I feel for Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist.

He has had to wait years and years for God to answer his prayers...

For years and years he and his wife Elizabeth have felt an emptiness, the emptiness of not having children.

I do not want to make an assumption about every couple or every man or every woman, but we do know about this couple, this man and this woman... they have waited years for a son. Elizabeth has called it her disgrace... and the angel knows that this is something that they have prayed for.

So you have disgrace
And an unanswered prayers

And there is something that it's very hard not to do when you have disgrace
And unanswered prayer

You put some armour on
You shield yourself from the worst of the pain
The massive disappointment is too sore to leave as an open wound
So you put armour on around it....

Disgrace is a thing that you live with if your pain has been public, if there is a sense that there is a shame on you, because of something that has happened to you, or something that you have done. It is a very public form of pain.

Elizabeth says that this is the "disgrace that I have endured among my people".

There is a lie that has gone out about Elizabeth and Zechariah – deficient, incomplete, not quite a full member of our future. And they have to not believe the lie, so what they do is put armour on.

In fact Elizabeth goes further and says "the disgrace which I have endured". This is painful.. possibly 30-40 years of pain, soreness, emptiness.

That's a lot of soreness and pain and emptiness to maintain any kind of faith through.
Any kind of good God...

And Zechariah, his is the pain of the disgrace,
And the pain of watching his wife in pain..
And the pain of proclaiming the stories of God to his people
And then not having his own prayers answered

What does he do,
He puts armour on,
He shields himself, from the disappointment, from the loss
That is too raw, too heavy to carry every day
So he shields himself, so it doesn't matter quite so much.

The pain of being a priest, a public holy man,
And a private pain
And a public disgrace.

Private, public,
Faith, doubt,
Emptiness, then prayer, then hope.... And then over many decades no hope. Guarding
against hope.

The thing about putting a shield on
It protects you from the pain
But it also shields you from the hope

It protects you from the disgrace
But it also shields you from being able to love...

That's the thing about shields – they are not selective
They don't just keep the bad stuff out
They keep the good stuff out as well

And so when Zechariah goes into the temple to serve one day, he is a man who is wearing
his shields.

Then the angel appears to him there is concrete around his soul,
There are walls and walls of protection.
Bricks and mortar, and shields, and calloused calloused heart.

Because when the angel says
"Do not be afraid Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard....
Oh he has prayed

And then you will have a son, you will have joy and gladness, you will rejoice at his birth...

I love that the description isn't just given a factual content – you will have a son,
But also an emotional content – you will have joy and gladness, and you will rejoice at his
birth.

This good news cannot get through the shields, so he says "how will this be"
And I feel that this is a reasonable question, after all, he's built a bit of protection round that
heart of his. It's not going to disappear instantly.

And the angel says “because you didn’t believe, you will become mute until these things happen”

And though this looks like a punishment, I also sense it is something of a gift, because it means that Zechariah has time to think, it means that he has silence and stillness to being to take off the shields.

It forces him into 9 months of waiting, and silence, and reflection, and in particular thinking about the way that he had chosen to put a distance – a shield between the stories of his people, and his own story... that was for them...I will not hope because it is too dangerous, if there is a God, then that God is far off.

And over those 9 months, he gets to work
Taking off the shields
Drilling through concrete
Dismantling boulders,
In silence, softening the toughened shell around his heart.

And then when the time is come for the babies birth, Zechariahs’ tongue is still not freed,
And then when it comes to the circumcision – 8 days later – he writes down the name of the child on a writing tablet, the name the angel had given him, and at that point – the day of promise which goes right back to Abraham in Genesis 17, his tongue his loosened.

And now his unshielded, unguarded, uncalloused soul
Sings a new song....

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on this people and redeemed them.”

At last, God has come near, and know it.

And this is a song which invites us to the moment, when all of this is made true, when all the hope is answered, when the waiting is over, when the pain is over, when you have this abiding sense that God has seen, God has heard, God is here.

No longer is there distance between the God story, and my story, kept safely apart– at last the two are brought together.

But they are brought together after time... there is much waiting,
God seems to give us hope and then test it,
Tell us the good, and then make us wait for it to happen,
And when it does, because of the silence, because of the waiting, the song we sing is all the better.

I love the lines at the end of the song

“By the tender mercy of our God

When you have an unguarded heart, you can speak of tender mercy
This literally means the mercy that arises from the deepest compassion of God's being.

The dawn from on high will break upon us
To give light to this who sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death.
To guide our feet into the way of peace."
(Luke 1:78-79)

This is the nature of God, who makes us wait..
To dismantle the shields
So that we might sing a new song.

So I ask
Where is the waiting for you...
And where are the shields....
Where is the hoping for you
Where are you guarding against hope.

Let this Advent time of Silence
Be a time for the dismantling of shields
To stop guarding and protecting
And let the yearning speak to faith

May it be that when the time is right...
The waiting will be over
The hope come will come to be, and you will know it with joy,
When the story becomes true, becomes your story
And you will sing

Bless be the God of Israel
For he has looked favourably on his people
And set them free

Set them free
With tender mercy
Set me free
With my heart wrapped
Within the tender heart of God

AMEN