

So the Angel Said, "Shut Up and Believe!"

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While we think mostly about Jesus at Christmas, perhaps we should think more about his relative, John the Baptist. John was only six months older than Jesus, and his birth to his mother Elizabeth was almost as surprising as Jesus's birth to Mary. But to me, the really interesting part of the story concerns John's dad, Zachariah. You see, Zachariah didn't handle the news of John's coming birth as well as Elizabeth did...

And no, that's not EXACTLY what the angel said. But that's exactly what he meant, as you'll see. This story comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1.

Back in the days when Herod was king of Israel,
 there lived a priest named Zechariah
 and his wife Elizabeth.
They wanted children but had none because
 Elizabeth was unable to have any
 and now they were both very old.
But God had noticed how much they loved Him
 so He decided to surprise them.

One day Zechariah was in the Temple,
 doing his normal priestly duties.
It was his turn to go alone into the sanctuary
 and burn incense before the Lord as part of the temple worship.
While he was there, an angel appeared in front of him...
 and Zechariah was afraid.
 Such things just didn't happen to priests!
But the angel told him to relax,
 that God was pleased with him and Elizabeth
 and was going to give them a son.

The angel said that this son,
 whom Zechariah was to name John,
 would be a great man,
 filled with God's Spirit from the day of his birth,
and that he would prepare the people of Israel to welcome the Messiah.

But Zechariah didn't believe him.
 After all, he and Elizabeth were just too old to have kids!

So the angel said, "I am Gabriel and I only speak the truth!
And since you won't believe me,
 you won't be able to speak AT ALL until John is born.
And believe me, John WILL be born.
 Now, Zechariah... shut up and believe!"

Outside the temple, the rest of the people began to talk among themselves.

"Where is Zechariah? Why is he taking so long?"

Then he came out and they were relieved...

But when he moved his mouth, nothing came out!

And he started waving his hands and pointing at the Temple,
and they realized he had seen a vision.

Then Zechariah silently finished out his duties as priest,
waved good-bye to everyone, and went home to Elizabeth.

Apparently Gabriel had told Elizabeth as well,

because she knew what to expect

and Zechariah sure couldn't tell her anything!

So it wasn't long before she got pregnant with John...

and she had believed, so she was able to talk about it all she wanted.

A few months later Gabriel also went to Mary, Elizabeth's relative,
and told her that she would give birth to Jesus.

Mary also believed and, at Gabriel's advice, she went to visit Elizabeth,
who was already six months along.

Zechariah just waved at Mary when she arrived.

And he listened as John, not yet born,

spoke God's blessing to Mary through Elizabeth.

Zechariah couldn't talk, but it gave him time to listen!

Finally, the time came and John was born.

Zechariah was a daddy... but all he could do was wave his hands excitedly.

At least he didn't have to worry about waking the baby!

Then, eight days later, at the ceremony where the baby would be named,
the rest of the relatives and friends were ready to name him Zechariah,
after his daddy.

But Elizabeth said, "NO! His name is going to be John!"

And everybody said, "What are you talking about, woman?"

There's nobody in your family named John!"

Then they started gesturing at Zechariah and asking,

"What do you say about this? He's your son!"

Zechariah, of course, had NOTHING to say.

But he motioned for a writing tablet

and after he wrote on it, he handed it to them.

Imagine their surprise when they read it!

Because he had scribbled these words:

"His name is John!"

And once he wrote those four little words,
Zechariah got his voice back
and he started praising God
for giving him and Elizabeth such a son.
It didn't take long for the whole town
and everyone else in the area
to hear about John's birth
and all the amazing things that happened around it.
And everyone who heard began to wonder,
"What kind of man will this child grow up to be?
Because one thing is very clear to us—
God has something special planned for little John."

Looking back now
we know that John grew up to be John the Baptist.
And part of the reason we remember John
is because he said so many wonderful and amazing things,
and because he told the people of Israel that
Jesus was the Messiah they were waiting for.
Words of truth are wonderful things.

But sometimes we need to remember what our parents told us—
"If you can't say anything good,
don't say anything at all."
Zechariah learned that the hard way.
And while God probably won't take away our voices
if we won't say good things that will help others believe and grow...
do we really want to take that chance?