

Have you ever been silenced? I don't mean shushed in a movie theater (though seriously: if you're talking in a movie, shhh!) I mean have you ever experienced someone trying to take away your voice?

In her book, "Raise Your Voice," journalist Kathy Khang shares a story of a conference she was helping to lead. As the conference began, it became clear there was some sort of serious leadership crisis happening behind the scenes. But no one was saying anything... All week long. She writes of the final night, when she felt compelled to speak up:

On the last night of the conference, our team crowded into a meeting room meant for a group half our size. It was late in the evening, but it was our only chance to hear from a senior leader who knew what had happened and what was still happening. We all listened while carefully shooting nervous glances across the room. I found myself wringing my hands, questions welling up in my mind about what had transpired and why.

When the floor was finally opened for questions, a few people made polite statements thanking the senior leader for coming and filling us in. I kept waiting for someone to ask the questions I was sure more than half of us were wondering: Why had we not met earlier in the week, been updated, and given a chance to respond? Why were we left in the dark until the night before we all were leaving, if not to keep us silent? I felt my emotions and tears from the beginning of the conference well up.

Seriously? No one was going to ask?

Fine. I waited for what I thought was an appropriate time, raised my hand, waited to be acknowledged, took a deep breath to keep my tears at bay, and steadied my voice. I don't remember the exact wording of my multipart question, but it didn't matter. Before I could finish, out of the corner of my eye I saw something move across my face. The person sitting next to me, a friend, was listening to my question and heard the direction it was going—and then physically covered my mouth with her hand. I had been silenced. Literally, physically stopped from speaking up.

I felt embarrassed and deeply ashamed. I was angry and confused, violated and sick to my stomach.

Have you ever been there? Where you felt a strong urge, something deeper than a desire, something so strong you have to call it a calling, to speak up for what's right, to address some wrong, and then someone took your voice away? Maybe they didn't literally cover your mouth (or maybe they did). Maybe they brushed your comment aside. Or belittled you. In some way, they made you feel small and unworthy.

It doesn't feel good. But there's something beautiful and true that the act of being silenced should remind us of. Kathy says it like this:

I didn't understand how powerful my words and my voice could be until someone made sure I wouldn't be heard.

Today, we're going to talk about our voices, about the reasons we don't speak up and how God calls us to speak up from right where we are. The good news is that God comes to us where we are, in our weakness, and invites us to speak. God gives our voices meaning and sound. So let's raise them together and worship this God!

Message

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Though for our culture, the Christmas season begins on Black Friday (or maybe the day after Halloween), in the Church, we observe the season of Advent. Too often, our churches play along with the glut of Christmas, encouraging the rampant spending that encourages debt culture and the endless parades of feasting. We spend four weeks waiting for Christmas, preparing ourselves to welcome God into the world and into our lives.

Advent is a season of pause. In a world of consuming and instant gratification, Advent says, "Not yet." During Advent, we put ourselves in the place of God's people as they waited for the birth of the Messiah. By waiting in Advent, by choosing a season of simplicity before the Christmas celebration, we learn to watch for the small, simple work of God we overlook in the hustle and bustle of the holiday season.

We don't just prepare ourselves. Advent is a season of *proclamation*, too. While Israel waited, God sent prophet after prophet to say, "Hang in there... God is at work. Something new is coming." The prophets help us see God at work. So too, during Advent, we declare to each other and to the world, "God is not done with you or me. God is not done with our world. Pay attention! Wake up! God is still at work!"

This season, our Advent series is called "Raise Your Voice". We're going to look at how God has called each of us to speak up. What does it mean to bear witness to God's good work - in our lives and in the world? What does it mean to be proclaimers?

In other words, usually during Advent, we listen to the voices of the prophets. This year, we're asking how God is calling *us* to be prophets. As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, how is God inviting you to speak up? Yes, you. Right in the middle of where you are. This series, at its heart, is about recognizing that God is with all of us, inviting all of us to speak up, to be bold, to share who God is making us to be.

So we're going to go right for the jugular today, so to speak.

When we imagine sharing who God is, speaking up against injustices that we see, when we imagine saying Yes to God, we run up against what psychologists call "Imposter syndrome".

Imposter syndrome is exactly what it sounds like - you assume a role, or look at the job before you and you feel way, way over your head. You look at what needs to be done and what you can do and you think, "No way can I do this."

And Imposter syndrome doesn't go away once you take the job or agree to serve or decide to speak up. We're constantly plagued by thoughts like, "What if they figure out I don't know what I'm doing?" What if they realize I'm underqualified? What if they figure out I don't have all the answers? What if they realize I'm still figuring all this out, too?

When we're experiencing impostor syndrome, we're discerning a gap. We see where God is calling us to be - the kind of person God is calling us to be, the kind of parent God is calling us to be, the kind of spouse or partner or friend, the sort of church God is calling us to be. We see how God is calling us to speak up against injustice, to stand for what's right.

And then we see who we are. Me with all my anxieties and insecurities and failures and shortcomings. And we wonder, how could that gap ever be crossed? I know God isn't supposed to make mistakes, but there's just no way God has the right person for this.

If I speak up in that meeting at work, everyone will laugh at me. If I rebuke that family member who told the racist joke, it'll cause conflict. If I try, they'll question my credentials or brush me off or...

There's a gap.

Advent speaks to this gap. We don't skip to Christmas, to God becoming human, to the miracle that changed the world. We start in waiting. In anxiety. In wondering if the promises God made will really come true.

During their long wait after the Exile, Israel was living in a gap. They saw who they were: a broken, defeated people with no home, no temple. They felt abandoned by their God, the God who claimed to be not just the God of Israel, but the creator of the whole world. The God who claimed to be rescuing the whole world through Israel.

Really? They were God's chosen people? This broken, beaten nation?

Really? They were the light of the world? This people who couldn't defeat their own darkness?

And yet, in the midst of their despair, God made this promise through the prophet Jeremiah:

The day will come, says the LORD, when I will do for Israel and Judah all the good things I have promised them.

In those days and at that time I will raise up a righteous descendant from King David's line. He will do what is just and right throughout the land.

In that day Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this will be its name: 'The LORD Is Our Righteousness.' -- Jeremiah 33:14-16

God said, Your story isn't over. Because your story is MY story. And a day is coming when I will fulfill every promise I ever made to you. Just hold on.

This is the good news of Advent: that God is the one who bridges the gap. That God comes to us not in our conquest, but in our defeat. God comes not in the light, but in our darkness, to be our light. God comes to us in the midst of our despair and says, "Don't give up. The light is coming."

We see this in the Advent story. Earlier, we heard the story of Zechariah. He was an old man who had never had children. Gabriel promised him his wife would conceive. In response, he said,

Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years."

Then the angel said, "I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news! But now, since you didn't believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time." -- Luke 1:18-20

Zechariah forgot he was living in God's story, and in God's story even old men, like Zechariah's ancient ancestor Abraham, could become fathers. God came right to where Zechariah was and brought hope.

Then Gabriel came to Mary, a young woman, engaged to be married. Gabriel told her something equally impossible would happen: she too, like her cousin Elizabeth would have an impossible child.

Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin." The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. -- Luke 1:34-35

Unlike Zechariah, what's happening to Mary is unprecedented. But we'll see throughout this series that Mary draws on Israel's story - specifically Hannah, the mother of Samuel - to understand what God is doing now.

Friends there's so much we could take from these stories today, but here, at the beginning of Advent, as we look out on a broken, divided world that is giving into despair, let's just start here:

God called an old man and a young woman. God wrapped them both up in this grand redemption story. Yes, God spoke the old male priest in the midst of worship. That's what everyone in that day would expect, if you asked them to point to who God's using.

But God also came to the young, unmarried girl. The person no one would expect. The person considered invisible to the world around her. God spoke to *her* too.

Friends, God is speaking to you. No matter who you are. God comes to *you* right where you are. This is the good news of Advent. God bridges the gap between what God is calling us to be and what we are. God comes to us, lives *with us*. And God calls us to stand up, to raise our voices and be part of the great story of God.

We imagine that our weakness disqualifies us from serving God. But the good news of Advent is that God comes to us *in our weakness*. God comes to us in our darkness, in our sin, in our insecurities, in our inabilities. God comes to us and says, "I'm doing a new thing. And you're going to be a part of it. Speak up, child. Raise your voice. Right where you are."

Advent is a call for us to trust not only that God is who God claims to be, but that *we are who God says we are*.

Who gets to decide who you are? That critical voice in your head? The people who have abused, betrayed, dismissed or oppressed you?

Or the one who created you and calls you a child? The one who knows you better than you know yourself, who sees you with the light of perfect truth?

When God came to Mary, she said:

Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." -- Luke 1:38

May this be our response.

We're not imposters. To believe that is to believe a lie. God comes to us, where we are, in our cubicles, in our families, in our schools, in our church. God invites US to be part of something beautiful, something life-giving. Will you say yes?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] You're welcome at Jesus' table, just as you are. Will you let God show you who you are?

Prayer: God, who am I?

Assignment + Blessing

At the beginning of this Advent journey, pray for God to show you three things:

1. Where am I?
2. Who am I?
3. How am I being called to raise my voice?