



SIEBENQUELL

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# The Photo on my Bookshelf

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SOURCE: R. MONNERJAHN 2015

On my shelf there is a photograph. A young mother is holding her four month old daughter. It is a picture of new life being embraced. It is a photograph of a gift of life being cherished, held close, and loved unto wholeness. The face of the mother is bathed in joy. Every fiber of her being is bent inward toward the child in a fierce concentration of tenderness. Her eyes have become glistening pools of awe. That photo moves my heart. Here, I think to myself, is the way we should always receive the gift of life from God. Here is the posture of one who knows how to receive a gift of grace.

We are challenged to ask ourselves whether this photo represents us. Do we know how to receive a gift of life from God? Do we know the posture of gladness when it comes to the mystery of life freely bestowed upon us? These are important questions. Yet, even more pressing is whether we are capable of receiving a gift of life from God when it is unexpected, disruptive, and overwhelming. It is one thing to open wide our hearts and hands when the gift is expected, but can we do so when it is an utter surprise?

The story of the birth of John the Baptist teaches us one of the vital steps in learning to receive such a gift of life graciously. God needs to silence us at times. When Zechariah is made an offer of unexpected life, his first reaction is to pour out a cascade of words that raise every conceivable objection of which he can think. Before he has had a chance to contemplate what this could mean to him, to Elisabeth and to the people of God, he already is fashioning the reasons for refusal. So the angel strikes him mute, and forcibly immerses him into the pools of silence.

We are frequently just like Zechariah. When the unexpected gifts of God rupture our pre-programmed and micro-managed lives, our tongues pour forth litanies of objection. We exhaustively examine all the reasons why this should not be or could not be happening to us. Before ever a chance is given to reflect on what such moments might mean, we have already declared them to be bad, wrong, ill timed, inopportune and unmanageable. This is when God needs to silence us. Time is needed to hear something other than our expectations and biases. Silence gives us the room to hear something other than our objections and reservations.

I know a couple whose infant son Jamie was born afflicted with a deadly and deforming illness. They were filled with fear, anger and pain. Moreover, everything they feared while standing next to their new-born son came to pass. His life radically changed their plans. His presence totally consumed their days. Their carefully crafted careers were tossed aside like so much tissue paper. Their financial strategies were jettisoned, as monies earmarked for leisure were invested into Jamie's loving. Ten years after I held their trembling hands at the cradle of their son, I returned to hold their callused hands at the casket of their son. But the tears of the graveside were radically different from the tears of the bedside. Tears born of fear, frustration and a formidable future had transformed into tears of loss, love and longing. In his final words to me before I took my leave of him, Jamie's father said, »Erik, I thank God that he gave me ten years to change my mind and heart. The greatest grief I have ever suffered became the greatest love I have ever known. I have been blessed.«

That, my friends, is why God sometimes needs to silence us. Otherwise we might never know the surprising offer of life that is our blessing.

Dedicated to the child on the photo on my bookshelf.

Blessed are you, who awaken the gaze of the photo

on the faces of those who love you.

**Erik Riechers**

*July 5, 2015, Alexandria*