

I. Advent in Biblical Perspective
From No News to Good News
“The Angelic Ministry of Christmas – Zechariah”
Luke 1:5–25
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I want to start by looking at Malachi 4, this last paragraph is the Old Testament canon. Malachi 4:5-6 says [5] “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. [6] And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of our God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

Now let’s look at Luke 1. We go from no news to Good News. That’s the focus this Advent season from no news. What am I speaking of? I’m speaking of the fact that God has not spoken for 400 plus years. In other words, as read through that Old Testament and get to the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, at the end of it the next page turned then becomes Matthew. Well, that empty page between Malachi and Matthew is over 400 years. That’s longer than the entire American experiment of settling North America to this day. That’s not the first time God had been silent for 400 years for it was the second time. The first time happened has God set aside His people, gave His promises to Abraham and told him that after the fathers Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the days of Joseph, the people would go into 400 years of affliction and silence in Egypt.

When we pick up Luke 1, there has been 400 plus years of affliction and silence. It’s interesting to note, as God breaks His silence, the no news becomes Good News. Why would I say that? The first four books of the New Testament are called the Gospels and the Gospel is Good News. God, who has now spoken in the latter days in His Son has in His Son, fulfilled everything He spoke in the former days. But for 400 years there were no prophet, no angelic messengers, no word from heaven, no word from the patriarchs, just silence. Now comes Good News.

Almost every time in the Advent Season we start with the birth of Jesus, but interestingly, in the Gospels, God chose an author of the third Gospel, Luke. Now, this Luke likely was a Gentile. He’s identified as a physician. He’s clearly a historian. He writes this 33 year account of the life of Jesus. Luke will follow it up dedicated to the same one that he dedicates this book to Theophilus. After Christ’s Ascension Luke will follow it up with another 33 year history of the in dwelt body of Christ, having given us the 33 year history of the Incarnate Body of Christ as Christ came to accomplish and fulfill the Messianic promises.

The Gospels of Mark and John do not go directly to the historical narratives of the birth of Jesus. We’re dependent upon Matthew and Luke for information on the infancy of Jesus, for what we call the advent infancy narratives, but the heavy lifting is given to Luke. Matthew will give us some account of the genealogy of Jesus and His adopted father, Joseph. Luke will give us the genealogy of His appointed mother, Mary. But Luke will give us a fuller explanation of what is happening in the days of His infancy. We find this in Luke 1:5-2:24, but he doesn’t start as Matthew does with the birth of Jesus. Luke starts the infancy narratives with the birth of John the Baptist in Luke 1.

Stop and think about this. God has called this Luke to be with Him. Luke has been disciplined by Paul and while Paul is in prison in Israel at Caesarea by the Sea, in those days, Luke began to scour and do interviews. He did his primary research. He went to eyewitnesses and wrote the Gospel so that we might be as he says 'Certain about the things of the Messiah.' As Luke starts with the birth of John the Baptist, there are four times that God speaks prior or as leading up to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. All four times He speaks through angels – three times through a singular angel, two times of those three times through a singular angel will be Gabriel and then a host of angels will lead the shepherds.

I plan to go through those four times that God breaks silence. Interestingly, the first time is given to Luke to record in the sovereign hand of God, giving us His Holy Word and it comes to us as an angel, comes to a man named Zechariah. Before we look at Luke 1 I want to share a few more thoughts with you.

I meet people who go on the keto diet and therefore they ordered these sandwiches and then they throw away the bread. Don't do that in your Bible for when you start to eat the rich nourishment, the bread sets it apart. Don't miss the fact and I'll try to draw this out as we get to Christ Sunday where everything comes to the infancy in that glorious statement of praise to God with Simeon and Anna, in the temple. Where does Luke start his book? He starts it in the temple. Here, these infancy narratives come packaged with God speaking in the place of appointed dwelling, in His temple to Zechariah. It ends with God speaking glorious praise to His name as the glory of the Lord fills this temple when Joseph and Mary bring Jesus and the encounter with Simeon and Anna. This is the obvious hand of God in the literary arrangement of this, but there's something even more obvious as to how God breaks silence. I want you to show you this as we go through the text.

Luke has done his research and now he begins to write about the life and ministry of the Messiah. Luke 1:1-4 says *[1] Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, [2] just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, [3] it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, [4] that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.*

After the prologue, Luke starts his writing when Herod was King of Judah but the Old Testament left off when the kings of Persia were ultimately in control. Luke 1:5-7 says *[5] In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. [6] And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. [7] But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.*

This is Herod the great who is in power. Why? It was because Rome appointed him and Rome was in power because the hand of God had fulfilled His promises and His prophecy. God has been silent for 400 years, but God has not been silent about what would take place in those 400 years. When you read the Prophets Zachariah Haggai, Malachi, and Daniel God says what He will do in those 400 years particularly in Daniel 2, 3, 7, 8, 9 and to some degree, chapter 11. So those 400 years have already been displayed and they have been fulfilled. The Assyrian empire was followed by the Babylonian Empire. The Medo-Persian Empire was followed by the extended Greek empire under Alexander the Great that now was followed by Rome. At this point in Luke, Rome has now been in power over the people of God with their oppression, affliction

and adversarial posture for 58 years. Now we are hearing of Herod the Great, who is in his 34th year appointed by Rome to take care of this troublesome area.

Zechariah is introduced here, who is a priest of the division of Abijah means he is a son of Aaron. It could also mean more than likely he got his name after the Old Testament Prophet Zechariah who was also a priest and a prophet, which I am currently doing a series on. People in certain tribes usually got the names of the most famous patriarchs in that tribe. It's a very important name. It means the Lord is my provider. Because of all the detail in this passage we know that Luke does not go sit in a cave and dream up Christianity and Jesus. He did his research. He interviewed. We call it primary research. He did all of his work and he puts all this in the context of history that the Gospels are not mystical speculation, their historical actuality. Go check the date, the people and the places for it all fits in history.

There were 20 plus divisions of the priests, not every priest was a Levite. In those divisions of the priest, the eighth division was the division of Abijah. In I Chronicles we see that David set in order the people and their duties in the temple. He appointed the Levites for what they were to do and then in I Chronicles 24, he appointed the priest, their duties and he assigned the duties to the divisions. Zechariah comes from the division of Abijah. According to Josephus, there was likely about 20,000 of these priests in the day of Zechariah who would come to their appointed time to do their duty. Each division usually got called on duty two times for two weeks every year, but it was all hands-on deck during the weeks of the feast. So seven times a year they all were there to serve in the temple. So this is one of the two weeks that Zechariah is now on duty, and he comes as a part of the division of Abijah.

Zechariah has a wife named Elizabeth which means in God do I hope. She is also of the daughters of Aaron. According to this text they were both righteous before the Lord which in other words, they had a good witness for the Lord. That does not mean they were perfect. In fact, we're about to find out. Zechariah is not perfect. He has a faltering faith. Elizabeth, I think, is revealed as imperfect in her speculations in this text, but it does mean in the evaluation of their life, their focus was on the Lord. The verdict from people watching them were that these people live under the eye of God and you just can't find anything in their public life to fault them at all. We also see that they had no children and both were advanced in years. According to the Bible scholar, Albert Edersheim, those advanced in years were at least 60 years old or older. Let's continue in the text.

Luke 1:8-10 says [8] *Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, [9] according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. [10] And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.*

Edersheim says that to be chosen by lot to do this would for most be a once in a lifetime thing to get to do and once you have been chosen you don't go back into the lot process after that. The burning of the incense would be accompanied by the priest making prayer on behalf of the people before the Lord, the prayer of ascent. We see in verse 10 that this was a prayer meeting and here everybody showed up. Unlike today, when you call for prayer not many show up. The people were there praying for him while he goes inside to pray for them. Let's continue.

Luke 1:11-13 says [11] *And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. [12] And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. [13] But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John."*

Luke is very specific here so we know he has done his research because he tells us exactly what side of the altar Zechariah is standing at. Seems like he had not been in there very long before the angel who will be named appears before him. Zechariah comes from a good family, as does his wife, he's a priest and seems to have lived a good life but there is only one shadow – they don't have the child they always wanted and they are passed the time to have children. While that obviously concerned Zechariah and Elizabeth, because it's mentioned to Luke in his interviews, it did not concern them to the point that their faithfulness to the Lord had been stilted and they were certainly working through it, but they've come to grips and they're trusting the Lord.

As he goes into the place to pray an angel comes. I believe that angels have to get training for I think angel training, number one, is to learn when to say, 'do not fear' because every time someone meets an angel fear or terror is the first emotion expressed. Why? It is because the Eternal has stepped into the temporal – light from the one who was in the presence of God has now come to the presence of Zachariah. Light has come into darkness, hope has come into despair and the result, whenever that happens, whether it's an angel or a miracle, is people go face down. 'Get up, do not fear.' There's plenty of reason to fear for the presence of God has come and apart from His grace, who can stand before Him?

When the angel says to Zechariah 'your prayer has been heard' it means God is about to answer his prayer. I know what many have all heard here, and I'm going to be somewhat contrarian. I do not believe Zechariah was praying for a son. I believe Zechariah as much as he wanted a child in that stewardship of that moment, he had bigger things to bring before the Lord besides their past childbearing age. You're probably thinking about Abraham and Sarah and it looks as though we have a New Testament counterpart with Zechariah and Elizabeth but Zechariah had no promise of a son. Abraham had a promise that he would have a son. So since they were advanced in years what would Zechariah have been praying about?

Right outside the temple is a man who we will be studying on Christ's Sunday during Advent whose name is Simeon. What is he praying for? He is praying that God would bring the consolation of Israel. I believe when Zechariah went to pray, he went to pray according to the promise of God – he's calling for the presence of God to deliver His people and it's that prayer that the angel says has been heard that God is going to answer. The glorious blessing that is coming with it, God is going to answer that prayer by giving Zechariah the son he doesn't have. Zechariah's son's birth through this providential miracle will not only be a symbolic pointing to the supernatural miracle of a virgin conception, but his son will be the declaration that God has heard his prayers to send him a son.

I believe Zechariah is praying what you and I pray, at least I hope we do – Come quickly, Lord Jesus. He has promised to come. We want Him to come. I believe he's praying God's will back to Him, for the Promised Messiah, who will deliver His people, will bring light to darkness, hope to despair and bring the Eternal into the temple. He has now been instructed God is going to answer that prayer and here is an affirmation of that truth that He's sending His Son – You, Zechariah will have a son and you will call his name John. This son that you will have is the declaration that God is answering your prayer, and he is going to be the instrument for God to accomplish His promises in His Son, because you are going to have a son that has a ministry that was promised to make ready the way of the Lord.

Do you see now why I read from Malachi at the beginning of this study? In the canon of Scripture, the last recorded words of God before He went silent were (paraphrase) "There will come one, a prophet in the Spirit and power of Elijah" (Malachi 4:5). Who is John the Baptist?

He is the fulfillment of that prophecy. Even Christ Himself tells us that John the Baptist is the one who came in the Spirit and power of Elijah (Matthew 11:14). What will John the Baptist do? He will turn the hearts of fathers to the children and the hearts of children to the fathers (Malachi 4:6).

Do I believe that has application to your home – the institution of the family? Yes, but I don't think that's what the promise is. That's a blessing of the promise. I believe it is looking at the family of God. When John the Baptist comes, he will lead the way of revival and repentance. He will turn – he will call for repentance. Now, it's not about the fathers of the faith, it's about the Lord for the children of God and the children under that ministry of the Lord through fathers will turn their lives to the fathers. So leadership and fellowship are united in repentance and renewal for the coming of the Lord. That's where He's pointing us.

One of the reasons I say that is because it's clear that while we can see blessings in homes when people come to Christ and praise God for that, Jesus also warned us that when you come to Him, there'll be a division between fathers and their children and mothers and their children and children and their parents. But this is speaking of something that ought to be at work in the family of God. John the Baptist, in preparing the way of the Lord, is calling the fathers of the faith to repentance and to love the children for the Lord and to the Lord and the children to hear and honor the fathers of the faith as they lead them to the Lord. This is what He calls them to see and do in this opening of the Advent season, according to the Gospel of Luke. Let's look further in the text.

Luke 1:14-17 the angel continues to say to Zechariah, [14] *“And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, [15] for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. [16] And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, [17] and he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”*

According to verse 14 John will have an impact when it says ‘many will rejoice at his birth.’ He is going to have an effective ministry in this call to repentance by the fathers of the faith and the children in the faith. Jesus Himself even said in Luke 7:28, [28] *I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John.* There is a glorious encouragement here that by in large, God saves people through the means of grace when they hear the word and come to faith in Christ, but God can extraordinarily save people, even when they are not yet able to hear the word, as He did with John the Baptist in the womb and brought him to spiritual life right within the womb. Will anyone argue with me about the personhood of the one in the womb from this text? How many times have we looked at church history to see Gospel Awakenings come from revival and revival comes from reformation in the leadership of Christ Church? That's the ministry of John the Baptist. Let's continue in the text where we see Zechariah falter in his faith.

Luke 1:18 says [18] *And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”*

Men, take note here. I want to make a point without a point. What does Zechariah say about himself? He said he was old. What did he say about his wife? He didn't say she was old. He found marital correct language. ‘My wife is somewhat advanced in years. My wife is mature. I'm old, she's mature.’ Let's continue in Luke 1.

Luke 1:19-25 says [19] *And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. [20] And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." [21] And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. [22] And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. [23] And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.*

[24] After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, [25] "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

Here we find out the name of the angel, it's Gabriel. Gabriel was the last named angel before God went silent to speak to Daniel and he was the first angel that God uses to break His silence. We also see that Zechariah took longer than the people expected him to take. When he comes out we find out he can't speak but he can't hear either because they are having to make signs to him and he to them. Notice he didn't run because of trauma but Zechariah finished his responsibility.

I do this with fear and trembling, but I'm going to do it and that's what we see here with Zechariah. You see a godly man falter in his faith when he heard the Word, and the result was silence – he couldn't speak. You also hear a woman and I understand why, has interpreted the fact that she doesn't have a child as a judgment upon herself and nothing could be further than the truth. God's special plan was a providential, miraculous birth that would prepare the way for the One who would come through the supernatural, miraculous conception, and then birth.

I'd like to end by giving you a couple of thoughts and a takeaway. Here's the first take away. The silence of God is not the absence of God. When I was growing up, Paul Simon wrote this song and Art Garfunkel sang it and it was called The Sounds of Silence. God is not speaking, but you can hear His sounds for 400 years. How did Zechariah and Elizabeth get out of the captivity in Babylon back to Jerusalem? How did the temple that he is ministering in ever get built from which Herod the Great would embellish it? How did they ever reclaim the division of Abijah without it being lost and scattered like the ten tribes? How did that lot fall on Zechariah that day? There is no such thing as luck for this is the sovereign hand of God at work. God's sovereignty is at work. How did Zachariah get in the division of Abijah? How did we get a division of Abijah that would get Zechariah to this place by a lot yet God moved upon David?

How did all of that happen? It happened because of the sovereign hand of God is at work. You can hear the sounds of His movement, even though He has not yet spoken. Here is the thread of God's providence, the sovereign hand of God at work and yes, 400 years have gone by, but yet here is the prophecy in Malachi 4. Here is an opening description of the first time God speaks, fulfilling the prophecy. In other words, God gave the prophecy, and the next thing you hear from God is the fulfillment of the prophecy. He just picks up where He laid off and He brought the fullness of His Word and the promise has been made.

400 years? Listen, with the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like one day (II Peter 3:8). That is not a formula, though. It is telling us that God is not confined and not defined by time. He does things at the right time, which He ordains every time and God answers prayers. I know you're probably thinking you have been praying for something a long time and God hasn't answer it but He has. He has three answers – yes, no, keep praying. And Zechariah is making a prayer that has been prayed for 400 years which is 'God, speak. Come,

send the Word in these latter days, speak in Your Son.’ God said, ‘no, it's not time, keep praying.’ And then He said, “Yes, now it is the time.”

Notice God is not limited by the frailty of the faltering faith of His people. Here is the faltering faith of a Godly, admirable man. He's a faithful man, but he faltered and that didn't stymie the purposes of God. God is not limited nor detoured by the frailty of His people or the faltering faith of His people. When God speaks, those who do not believe will be marked by silence, but those that do believe, cannot and will not be silent or silenced.

I suggest you do some research because I don't have time to cover this. Go to the end of the chapter and read the benediction of Zechariah (Luke 1:67-80). When John the Baptist is born, his wife says ‘John is his name.’ He had told her he named his child, but they heard Elizabeth and said that you don't have anybody named John in your background. Why are you naming him John? How about Zechariah Junior and then in the wax covered wooden tablet Zechariah writes ‘His name is John’ and at moment he is loosed from his silence. He can now hear. He can now speak and he can now declare the Lord. As you read Luke 1:67-80 Zechariah can't stop praising God and telling the world the consolation of Israel has come.

Here comes the very seedbed of Calvin's motto for life. Out of darkness, light is shining. Eternity has broken into time. Heaven has come to the earth. Hope has come to the despair. Deliverance is coming for the people of God, and He will bring Christ to the people, just as His Son will bring Christ to the people and the people to Christ. Those who believe will not be marked by silence. The deaf will hear, the lame will let leap. The dead will live. The blind will see and they will bless the name of the Lord. Give praise to the Lord and they'll bless others by bringing Christ to them and bringing them to Christ.

You know, not those who have heard the Word with faltering faith, but those who hear the word with saving faith will not be silent. They will lift up praise to God in the assembly of the people of God, and nothing is more important and from that assembly they will scatter to bring the light to darkness, the hope to despair, and the Savior who saves sinners. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be in Your Word. Please speak to our hearts. Father, I pray anyone reading this who does not have saving faith in Christ, I pray that you would be at work in their lives. The dead will live, the lame will leap. The deaf will hear and the mute will speak. Jesus, I come. Praise God, who has given me the Savior who I give myself to Him. If you would like to pray with someone please contact us here at Briarwood at (205) 776-5200. Come to Jesus. Oh, God please send us into this world for Jesus that we might go that the people who dwell in darkness might hear. We who hear the Word with faltering faith marked by our silence, our apathy in worship and witness please fill us. Please send Your Spirit upon us, even as you did with Elizabeth and Zechariah. May we have our confidence in a sovereign, saving, sealing, securing, sanctifying, and sending God of glory and grace. Jesus, we give You praise in the assembly and speak Good News to those who have no news. I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.