

April 8, 2018
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Luke
Community Baptist Church
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as we prepare to hear from Luke 1:5-25.

1. What significance does Luke's mention of Herod lend to the story?
2. Explain how Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous and walking blamelessly in the Lord's commands and statutes?
3. Why was Zechariah's service a special opportunity?
4. Compare Zechariah's place in God's plan with your place in God's plan.
5. If God sent an angel to give you a direct answer to your lifelong prayer, would you doubt or believe?
6. What lesson can we learn from God causing Zechariah to be mute for 9 months?

THE PROMISED FORERUNNER OF CHRIST

Luke 1:5-25

The headline at *Israel Today*, a Jewish newspaper, declared last week, "Top Israeli Rabbi Believes Trump Will Build Third Temple in Jerusalem." That is a very intriguing statement to us who hold to the Premillennial interpretation of last things. Rabbi Yosef Berger is the rabbi in charge of King David's Tomb on Mount Zion, and the son of a widely revered Hasidic leader. Therefore, his prophecy is quite

significant. Why? Rabbi Berger believes the building of the third temple will precede the coming of Messiah. Devout Jews are looking forward with great anticipation for the coming of Messiah. The recent recognition of Jerusalem as their capital and the building of the third temple are two great events that point to Messiah's soon coming, in their thinking.

This is not the first time people in Israel have looked forward to Messiah's coming. As we well know, Israel's history is replete with the evidence of the people's failure to trust God, and, therefore, their constant failure in apostasy. We know that Abraham was saved by faith in God. He believed God and God accounted righteousness to him (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3). Salvation has always been the result of faith.

However, the people of God's nation preferred worshipping the make-believe gods of their neighbors which finally resulted in God sending them into captivity in Babylon. After seventy years God sent the people back to restore Jerusalem. But things were no better. The people still refused to trust God and so God sent them one final message through the prophet Malachi. And then God went silent for 400 years.

God's message through Malachi included this wonderful promise about the coming Messiah: *Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts (Malachi 3:1).*

For 400 years, the devout people, the few who trusted God, looked with anticipation for the coming of Messiah. That is why Luke began his telling of the Good News with the birth of John. It was a miraculous birth in that his parents were too old for such things. It preceded the even more miraculous birth of Christ. John was born to Zechariah the priest who was continuing the ceremonial worship structure of the Old Testament, thus connecting the Old and New Testaments.

But most important is the fact that the angel told father Zechariah that his son John would fulfill the promised role of Malachi's messenger who would prepare the way. The Lord Jesus was about to come suddenly to His temple. Would the people be

ready? Would they know? God sent John to pave the way, to arrest the people's attention, to point to Messiah. If John was the promised forerunner of Messiah, then the good news is that Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, is the promised Messiah.

However, when Messiah came the religious leaders rejected Him and encouraged the masses to do the same. And still they wait. Now devout religious leaders look for every sign, every forerunner who will portend the coming of Messiah. How amazing that they rejected the true Messiah but will embrace the false Messiah, Antichrist who will trick them.

Even Zechariah who was engaged in God's business at the temple was too incredulous to believe God's messenger. Therefore, God gave a miraculous sign to the doubting priest. He became mute until his wife Elizabeth delivered the promised child. Like we are too often, Zechariah was slow to believe. But like us also, God used him to accomplish His glory.

Privileged to Serve God (vv.5-10).

Zechariah lived and served at a special time (vv.5-6). Though neither he nor the people understood it, that was a unique time of preparation. *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 (v.5).*

The Herod mentioned here was Herod the Great. He was born in 73 B.C. to a descendant of Esau, who converted to Judaism. Herod was raised a Jew. Rome's ruler, Mark Antony (in conjunction with Octavian), appointed him king of Judea in 40 B.C. and after a three year war he was the settled King of the Jews and reigned as such until his death in 4 B.C. Herod remodeled the second temple into a grand and beautiful structure as a gift to the Jews, but they hated him anyway. He was also the Herod who in a jealous rage ordered the death of the babies in Bethlehem at the birth of Christ.

Herod's sons and grandson also play significant roles in the New Testament. At Herod the Great's death, he bequeathed the

throne over Judah to Achelaus who is simply mentioned as the Herod who replaced Herod the Great (Matthew 2:22). Herod the Tetrarch, also called Antipas, inherited Galilee and Perea. He was the Herod who had John the Baptist beheaded (Mark 6:14-28). Also, Pilate sent Jesus to him during His trial (Luke 13:13). "Herod the King," also known as Agrippa (grandson of Herod the Great), arrested Peter, ravished the Church, and died suddenly according to Luke's account in Acts 12:20. Herod Agrippa II, son of Agrippa, was the Herod who mocked Paul about being convinced to become a Christian (Acts 26:28).

Luke's record gives us a very good idea of the time and historical setting of Jesus's ministry. At that time and in that setting, there was a priest named Zechariah whose name means "Yahweh Remembers." We do well to remember that it was the priests' duty to represent God to the people by teaching them the Old Testament Scriptures. It was also the priests' duty to represent the people before God by offering the sacrifices the people brought to the temple (more on that in vv. 8-9). Luke told us that this priest Zechariah served in one of the 24 divisions of priests named for Abijah. He married Elizabeth a descendant of Aaron the first priest.

For this priest those days were a time of discouragement. How can that be in light of the statements, *And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord (v.6)*? Luke said that they were righteous. That does not mean that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous according to their own assessment, which would be self-righteous. Nor were they righteous according to their peers' assessment, which could simply be devoutly religious. Rather this couple was righteous before God. It means that God made them righteous. How did He do that? The same way God made Abraham righteous. In the Genesis record we read about Abraham, *And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6)*. God's righteousness has always been gained through faith.

Zechariah and Elizabeth trusted God and as a result they lived out that trust and they were called blameless. When God makes a person righteous, He also sanctifies the person. Walking speaks of lifestyle and blameless speaks of growing into God's character. Therefore, the word *blameless* here does not mean perfect. However,

it does speak of heading toward perfection. The word is like God's assessment of Job to Satan ("Have you considered My servant Job . . . a blameless and upright man. . ." Job 1:8). If we drop back in that story just a few verses, we discover what practical blamelessness looks like. *There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil (Job 1:1)*. Job was blameless in that he was a man of integrity and straight as an arrow (*upright*). That is how his life appeared because he "maintained an awesome respect for God" and "characteristically turned away from evil."

Zechariah and Elizabeth were like that. Those traits would make for a very encouraging life, right? But God never promises a rose garden, an easy path, a life of pleasure to the people He justifies. And so we read that they were childless. *But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years (v. 7)*. Raising up posterity was critically important to the Jewish people. God had commanded His people to be fruitful and multiply. Large families guaranteed the continuation of the family name. Children were especially important in the Old Testament times when the family continued to inherit a particular parcel of ground.

As Elizabeth confessed at the end of our text, not to raise up posterity marked the childless mother with shame and reproach. To make matters worse, the couple was too old by common opinion to have children. Did they desire children? No doubt. Did they trust God? Probably most of the time.

Along with that setting, we read that Zechariah served in common circumstances (vv.8-10). As had been the case for many years in Jerusalem, there was a priest serving. *Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense (vv.8-9)*. The setting was boringly common as it had been going on since the time of Moses. There was the morning and evening sacrifice day after day for over a thousand years (when Israel was actually willing and able to do it). There was the changing of the holy bread, trimming the lamps on the lamp stand and filling with oil, and resupply the incense. And probably the typical teaching of children and duties pertaining to the Sabbath.

But for Zechariah it was a highly privileged time in the midst of the common repetition. There were close to 20,000 priests in Israel at this time. Most of the time these priests served the Lord in outlying cities and villages. Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in an obscure, unnamed village somewhere in the Judean hills. We learn that a few verses later where we read, *In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah (Luke 1:39)*. We don't even know the name of the town.

Zechariah had been chosen by lot to serve at the temple in Jerusalem. This was a really big deal. Many priests never had this privilege. It was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to serve at the house of the Lord for two weeks. Zechariah's duty was to resupply the incense and the hot coals on the altar of incense. Throughout the Old Testament and in the Revelation, the smoke that rose from the incense burning on the altar was a symbol of the prayers of God's people rising into the nostrils of God as a sweet smelling savor. It is a good picture of what God thinks of our prayers.

Well guess what? While Zechariah was replenishing the symbol of the prayers of God's people, the people were outside praying. *And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense (v.10)*. Were their prayers sincere or were they like the rote and thoughtless repetition we tend to fall into? Were they praying like so many devout Jews rocking at the wailing wall today? If they were sincere, for what were they praying? No doubt there were any number of different kinds of prayers and requests going up before God. Certainly there were people in the crowd who were praying fervently that God would send the promised Messiah to set His people free again. And where was God? Did He hear? Did He care? Does He hear you and care about what concerns you?

Privileged to be Part of God's Eternal Plan (vv.11-20).

God has a plan (vv.11-17). This story teaches us that God has a plan for you personally. That is why Zechariah was shocked to come face-to-face with an angel. *And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him (vv.11-12)*. All of a sudden there was a divine, out-of-this-world

messenger. Much of the time when angels show up in Bible history, they don't have to introduce themselves and they are not wearing identification tags. And no, these messengers from God did not have wings, did not wear white robes and have a halo over their heads. Be that as it may, there was something about Gabriel that struck fear in the righteous, blameless man's heart.

As is typically the case in the Bible, the angel brought good news from God. *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. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth"* (vv.13-14). Good news! God hears your prayer. Therefore, we should keep praying. More good news for Zechariah, "God is going to answer your prayer with a 'yes' and your wife will bear a son . . . regardless of age and human limitations." But the angel had not relayed the entire message. Also true was, "You will name him John." And maybe Zechariah was thinking, "Uhhh, isn't the choice of names ours to make?" Not when God is in control of a specific situation for His glory.

And more good news. Obviously, *you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth* (v.14). Notice the angel didn't say anything about Herod's son killing John in the future. Maybe God didn't tell the messenger that part. God was in control of that too!

And God has a plan for His people also. *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* (v.15). The Lord will make John great. Because he was God's chosen servant, John must live like he belongs to the Lord. He was to have no use of wine or strong drink, that looks a lot like the Nazarite vow but was something special for John. The fact that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit at birth is unusual. We cannot help but see the similarity with God's plan for each of us who are Christians. *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit* (Ephesians 5:18).

In God's plan for the people, God was going to use John as an instrument to bring people to Himself. *And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God* (v.16). With that also restoring

right relationships between God and His people would result in restored right relationships in families. *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* (v.17a). Ultimately, God would use John to make people ready for God's great work, *To make ready for the Lord a people prepared* (v.17b). Oh! This was the promise of Malachi 3:1. Yes, *he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah*, means that John was going to prepare the way for the promised Messiah.

How incredibly exciting! Zechariah was probably whooping it up shouting about this being his lucky day. No Zechariah was too much like us. He reminds us how tempting it is to doubt God's plan. That doubt might be due, to some extent, to the reality that sometimes God's plan eclipses human experience. Therefore, *Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."* His response was essentially, "That's pretty hard to believe in light of the circumstances." Was he thinking, "Give me a sign?"

Though God fully understands our weaknesses, He still prefers that we simply trust what He says to us. All the time (in tests and not in tests), God simply wants us to listen to Him. I like Gabriel's response to Zechariah's doubt. He offered his credentials. *And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news"* (v.19). As if to say, "Okay is that good enough?"

Are we that much better at trusting God than the priest was? God said that this Bible is His word to us. God said that it is forever settled in heaven; it's not going to change. God said that He breathed out this word, and it is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction and discipline in instruction.

Is that good enough? Do you believe now? Not always. There are times when we would still like a sign. Be careful about asking for signs. They can be painful. One time I knew a family that made great boasts about their walk with the Lord. However, I saw several indications that maybe what they said was not true. Therefore, I prayed to God and asked Him to give me a clear sign that their testimony was valid or false. In a matter of a few weeks, I came face-to-face with a very painful situation with that family.

Zechariah knows what I mean. If he wanted proof of God's plan, he sure got it. *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 (v.20).* It is as though God said, "Okay, if you don't want to believe me, I'll give you plenty of time to think about it . . . in silence. Then you will believe."

Privileged to Experience God's Faithfulness (vv.21-24).

Right away it was obvious that God kept His word about the priest's silence (vv.21-22). The people knew something was awry when Zechariah was not acting predictably. *And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple (v.21).* After observing this ritual for thousands of times, the people could predict how it would proceed. Not this time. When God is in control and working out specific details for His own glory, life may lose its predictability. Life becoming unpredictable presents a good opportunity to stretch our faith in God.

In this case, Zechariah demonstrated God's promise to him. *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 (v.22).* God promised silence. God delivered the promise. God's servant demonstrated God's promise.

God kept His word about the priest's child also (vv.23-24). Zechariah went home because he was finished with his service. *And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home (v.23).* Back to the rut, the ordinary life of service. That is where most of our service to the Lord will be. Make your life a productive, useful, sanctifying rut for the glory of God.

Out of the rut was the fact that Zechariah's wife conceived just like the angel had promised. *After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden (v.24).* That was kind of weird – the staying out of sight thing. Maybe she stayed out of sight in order to avoid controversy and debates. At five months her "baby bump" would speak for itself. And as people would ask in astonishment, "Elizabeth, are you pregnant?" she would reply, "Thus

the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people" (v.25).

Throughout this story we have come face-to-face with God doing amazing works in order to bring about His will. That is the whole story of Luke. Luke simply wrote to his friend Theophilus about Jesus, God the Son, Savior from sin. It had to be "the good news" which is the meaning of the word Gospel. How have you responded to the good news? Have you confessed your sin and embraced Jesus Christ as God's provided payment to cover your offenses? We who God has justified and made righteous through faith have some very good news to tell others. But do we?