

“Good News for Zechariah”

Luke 1: 11-20

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Text: (NIV) ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. ¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." ¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." ¹⁹ The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

Imagine that! The Angel Gabriel visited Zechariah and said to him: **“20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words...”** Almost as if the angel was saying that if a God-fearing man is going to use his tongue to dishonor God...that tongue will be silenced until it learns that God means what he says. There is a tremendous teaching in this text for all of us. It might reduce to simply this: when Good News comes to any believer it is Good News for the Kingdom of God...for all of us. And when Good News comes to the Kingdom...for all of us...it is Good News for us as individuals. But when doubters, even Kingdom doubters, question God’s might and ways...even though they are believers...they will be silenced. Very interesting.

In our Engage Newsletter this week, you will find a study section... “Faith Talk Guide” put together by Pastor Brown for use by families. I hope you’ll spend some time with around it your table at home. It asks the question “What can we do to be a blessing to and for future generations?” A great question and at first, Zechariah probably could not answer it! So...we’re going very deep today. No fluffy Christmas sermon this morning. God’s Holy Spirit wants us to learn from our distant friend Zechariah the Priest. But first, as always, let us pray.

Zechariah was rendered temporarily mute. I was considering muteness as I studied for this sermon. The inability to speak. I did some reading on the topic and I found that only very, very rarely do people regain their speech if they have lost it from a stroke or other event. In fact, it is so rare for the brain to heal or adjust to muteness that total recovery of speech is almost unheard of. Experts are trying to solve this problem. Researchers at Boston University have actually implanted electrodes into the brains of people who have lost their ability to speak. Their goal is to enable thought patterns to interface with a computer so that the mute person can “speak” thru a word processor. Fascinating. It’s a worthy endeavor. But just think of how frustrating it would be to think clearly but no longer be able to speak. And all the more if God’s messenger sends the muteness your way! Zechariah may have been the only person in history to be rendered temporarily mute by God’s Angel...so for him it was even more frustrating. Let’s consider the way Zechariah received the Good News spoken to him by Gabriel.

First, who are these two individuals...Gabriel and Zechariah? “Gabriel” is a Hebrew word meaning “Man of God.” “Angel” in both the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Greek text of the New Testament means “messenger.” Sometimes angels appear with wings but they generally appear as everyday people. Or at least awesome everyday people. Now, as an aside: we only see the phrase “The Angel of the Lord” in the Old Testament. The definite article “the” indicates the Divine presence itself. We also see times when “an” Angel of the Lord appears in the Old Testament. But in the New Testament we only see “An Angel of the Lord” probably because Christ had come and he was God incarnated. In any case, Gabriel was a high powered and much trusted Angel/Messenger of the Lord but he was not to be worshipped. In fact, in Colossians Chapter Two, Paul points out that the worship of angelic beings is forbidden.

OK. “An” angel sent by God had the role of Super-Prophet and spoke for God to man. God expected the man to receive the angel’s words as God’s own words. That is why Gabriel is offended at Zechariah’s doubts. That is why Gabriel says: **“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you...”** Gabriel expects that a Priest should understand how to receive the words of God brought by God’s messenger. Especially since Gabriel had been around serving at the Throne of God since almost forever! It was Gabriel who was sent to Daniel in Chapter Eight to explain Daniel’s vision of the end times. And that was in about 600 BC, so Gabriel is a veteran angel! He also speaks, as we know, to Mary about the coming Christ child. So, for Zechariah to be skeptical about what Gabriel says was to be skeptical about what God himself said. And if we doubt the existence of angels we doubt the Word of God itself!

Now, as to Zechariah. He was a faithful Priest who was “chosen by lot” to serve for a time inside the Temple of the Lord because his group of Priests were on duty around the Temple. This was strictly a matter of “luck” ... because some Priests never had their names drawn and never got to serve this way. How did it work? Probably some kind of drawing of broken stems

or something from a vase. But the Bible makes it clear that even when that happens, God is sovereignly in control. We read in **Proverbs 16:33 (NIV)** ³³ **The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.** One of the most difficult things to accept is that God must sovereignly approve everything that happens. There is no way for God not to be in control because he is all-powerful and he is everywhere. So, our modern expression that some great occurrence is a “God-thing” is very nice. But do we realize that when the shooter kills people on a campus or the terrorists attack or the job is lost...those are “God-things” too? Even what we call luck.

A young guy in the convenience store asked me if I wanted to buy lottery tickets the other day and I said “No thanks...but if I did I would pray first.” I’m not sure he understood my meaning. But, in any case, it was Zechariah’s good Divine fortune to be chosen. We know also that he is a fairly old man. As a sixty-four year old I must be careful here for my own sake here. We all know that today’s sixty four is the old fifty four. But in Zechariah’s day sixty four was today’s seventy four at least! Zechariah says this about himself and his wife Elizabeth:

“I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

The word used means “advanced.” So, this is a great piece of Biblical history. We have recorded here a conversation between an ageless angel and an old Priest! But the point is that Zechariah and Elizabeth were well beyond the age for having children. And in their time, being without children was considered quite shameful. Their society generally believed that children were a sign of God’s approval and to be “barren” was a sign that God considered you unsuited for parenting. So, although Zechariah and Elizabeth were respected, that respect was with a small measure of curiosity by their neighbors. In any case, they are not expecting to be parents when at that point they should be grandparents. But there was Good News for both Zechariah and Elizabeth his wife. Let’s consider how the Good News was received and study what we can learn about prayer...as we consider how God answered their prayers. Remember, here is the exchange between Gabriel and Zechariah:

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.”

Then skipping ahead:

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

I think it was the phrase “How can I be sure of this?” that irritated Gabriel. We read:

19 The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

Remember that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth have been praying probably many times a day for years. Now God says thru the angel "OK...I'm saying 'Yes' to your prayers!" And all Zechariah can say...it seems is...."Nah. Can't be!" This interaction gives us a perfect case study on prayer. Consider these thoughts:

FIRST: PRAYER REQUESTS MUST BE JUST! THE PETITIONER MUST SEEK AFTER SOMETHING THAT IN GOD'S SIGHT IS CONSISTENT WITH JUSTICE.

Recently, missionary friends had their house broken into and some very important possessions were stolen. They began to pray that the Lord would lead them to recover those items. And he did. Most of them have been returned. Their prayer was just. God abhors stealing. God abhors injustice. So, in this instance, God acted on their behalf and quickly. But if they had been praying for a Rolls-Royce convertible I have a feeling that their prayer would have been ignored! Prayers that are pleasing to God are JUST! CAUTION: Because a prayer is just does not mean it will be answered with a "Yes!" from God. It would just to pray for healing but God may have other even more just plans. However, prayers must be just to even be heard by God.

That truth about a prayer that is just is embedded in the parable that the Lord Jesus Christ told about the widow who kept pestering the unjust judge. We read:

Luke 18:2-7 (NIV) 2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. 3 And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' 4 "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" 6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?"

She was asking for justice! Jesus goes on to say that God's chosen ones will get justice and quickly. But "quickly" means in God's time not ours. The point is that God loves just and righteous prayers. Zechariah and Elizabeth having been asking for a child for years. Preferably a boy child so their family line could be carried forth. And that prayer was absolutely just in God's sight. When we pray, do we ask ourselves "Is this prayer just? Is it the kind of request that God wants to hear?"

SECOND: PRAYER REQUESTS MUST BE BROUGHT WITH PATIENCE!

We have no way of knowing how long they had been married and/or how long they had been praying. But since they did not live in the age of instant gratification, they had no doubt developed great patience waiting upon God. And all the more so because they were getting older and the window for child bearing was slipping away.

When we pray, are we doing so with patience? That is the value of an ongoing prayer life that waits upon the Lord. Nothing about our age so undermines a deep walk with the Lord as much as how quickly we look for gratification. Nothing about our lives and culture teaches us patience. I saw an episode of the Waltons while on the treadmill the other day. It takes place in the 1930's and John Boy has sent away for a new cooking pot for his mother...one that is electric! The whole family is all excited when it arrives. They had waited over a month for it after John Boy sent in his money. Today, we'd expect Amazon to have it to us tomorrow! Or sooner.

We have no sense of any "Gratification Gap." That's the time between wanting something and getting it. So, naturally when we deal with God we act the same way. But God is never hurried. The poet said:

"The wheels of God grind slowly indeed, but they grind exceedingly fine!"

Zechariah and Elizabeth have been praying for a child for years. And God has been, in their view, slow to answer their prayers. Why? Because prayer must be just and patient and...

THIRD: PRAYER REQUESTS MUST BE BROUGHT WITH HUMILITY!

If we think about it, when we pray we are asking God to *do* something. Actually, we are asking him to do something that he does not have to do! It is one of the great mistakes of our age theologically to say that there are certain things God *must* do. Some people go as far as to say God must heal or God must provide. And if our prayers are just and patient and humble, God must answer them. But if we feel God must answer our prayers then we and our prayers are not humble! Easy as that. The petitioner must come with humility!

There will be times when justice and patience and even humility are present but God says "No!" That seems to be what happened to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Their prayers for a child had all of the right elements. But the Saints throughout the ages have struggled with the mystery of unanswered prayer. Over and over again we read it in the Psalms:

Psalm 13:1 (NIV) ¹How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

Does this waiting and this frustration from the Psalmist have anything to do with humility? Yes! Humility grows when we say to God "I'd like this or that right now...but it is your decision!"

Ultimately, our lack of patience is rooted in our pride. We've all heard too many Burger King ads that say "Have it your way!" But in the Kingdom of God we must seek to have it God's way.

Ok. So, thus far we've given Zechariah and Elizabeth credit for approaching God with prayers for a child that are JUST and PATIENT and HUMBLE. But their prayers went unanswered for so long that by the time God sent his angel Gabriel...Zechariah couldn't believe those prayers....could be answered! Why not? Not to be critical about our Priest friend but his prayers were perhaps missing the final piece that is always needed in God-approved prayers. Namely this: *Will this prayer if answered GLORIFY God?* In other words, we must stop seeing prayer as something we want God to do primarily for our sake and begin to see it more and more...as something to be done for his sake! Will this provision from God meet my need and make me happy? Fine! But will it also bring him Glory? *To glorify God is literally to MAGNIFY God!* To make his greatness overwhelmingly obvious!

The Glory of God is the great forgotten value in our Christian faith. We tend to think that salvation is all about our desperate need for eternal life and it is. But behind all of that more than anything else in the Bible is this HIGHEST PRIORITY: *THAT GOD BE GLORIFIED!* That God be shown to be the Almighty and Gracious and Compassionate God that he is so that man may see his glory in just who he is! Does this prayer glorify God? If God grants my request will it bring him glory?

How important is this goal of glorifying God? Overwhelmingly important! Remember the Lord Jesus Christ praying:

John 17:4-5 (NIV) ⁴ I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

Jesus wants the Father glorified! Remember that amazing passage in the Old Testament Book of Joshua when a warrior named Achan stole some of the forbidden trophies we read:

Joshua 7:19 (NIV) ¹⁹ Then Joshua said to Achan, "My son, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give him the praise. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me."

And Achan knows very well that he and his clan will be stoned to death if he confesses. But he simply says "It is true. I have sinned against the Lord." God was glorified in his confession. Will you die...will I die...to glorify God? So, what might this have to do with the prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth?

FOUR: PRAYER REQUESTS SHOULD SEEK TO GLORIFY God!

Think about something. God could have answered their prayers years before this. And a conception and a pregnancy and a child birth would have glorified God. But only in the

everyday sense. God is glorified in our prayers when he makes us wait or sends circumstances in which only he can make it happen. It would be no big deal for Elizabeth to conceive at age thirty. Everyone would say “Oh that’s nice! They’re having a baby. Very normal.” But what if she and Zechariah are seventy? Then it is a miracle and glorifies God in marvelous ways! Life the young Virgin Mary conceiving without a man’s intimacy!

Here’s a great principle about prayer. God provides us with many skills and resources. And if you can do it in a natural way, he will let you do it without supernatural help! In other words, if I have fifty dollars and there is a grocery store down the street, it makes very little sense for me to ask God to miraculously send me a bag of groceries. But if I have no money or no store nearby, then only he can provide. We should always pray for wisdom and leading. But we should not look for special intervention when he has already provided. Like the preacher who decided not to write a sermon but just rely upon God to speak to him when he got into the pulpit. There he stood quietly...and he prayed “Well...Lord what do you have to say to me?” And God said “Here is what I have to say: you’re not prepared!”

Zechariah no doubt looked back and realized how much more God was glorified by giving him and his wife their child when only God could bring it about because they were too old. Prayer must be JUST and PATIENT and HUMBLE and GLORIFYING to God. When all of that was clear to Zechariah, God gave him back his voice! Zechariah’s prayer journey for a child taught him a great deal. She gave birth to a son and she said he is to be named John. Everyone was puzzled so...

Luke 1:62-64 (NIV) ⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God.

May our prayers be JUST and HUMBLE and PATIENT and may they bring God GLORY!
Then we too will speak praising God.

Let us pray.

