

Sermon/Bible Class for December 9, 2012 – Advent 2

Luke 1:5-25

Last Sunday we observed how Jesus, being true God, existed from eternity. He was active – even in the Old Testament era – getting everything ready for the time he would take on human flesh and blood in order to be our Savior.

And now, when Herod was King of Judea, the angels in heaven began to stir – ready to rejoice. Why? Because God commissioned his archangel Gabriel with a special assignment: to announce the birth of the LORD's forerunner.

And so we begin our study:

⁵ *In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.*

Zechariah (whose name means “the Lord remembers”) was not just a normal Levite. He was a descendant of Aaron – the family within Israel that had the most sacred charge of serving before the LORD in the temple (Exodus 40:12-15). What an honor this was: to make sacrifices and prayers on behalf of the people, to be a living picture of the Christ and the salvation He would accomplish!

Now, priests were free to marry any woman of Israel, but it was considered a double honor to have a fellow daughter of Aaron as wife – and this is what Zechariah had in Elizabeth (whose name means, “My God is an oath).

Zechariah and Elizabeth are described as “upright” in the sight of God. A much better translation would be that they were “righteous” in the sight of God. How? Not through their works. They were sinners just like us - plagued with doubts just as we are. Their righteousness came from God through their faith in the coming Messiah. Like Abraham, they believed the LORD, and He credited it to them as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3)

And there was another result of their faith. They didn't use their joy in the promised Christ as an excuse to sin and live for themselves. No. Their hope in the promised Messiah let them to live to God's glory. Our text says they observed *all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly*.

Now understand this correctly: this does not mean they never sinned. It means, rather, that they took care in trying to live (outwardly) good lives so that God would be glorified. They were living examples of what Jesus would later command: *let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.* (Mat 5:16) Like Abraham (James 2:21ff), Zechariah and Elizabeth not only believed God, but let their faith show in their actions – in how they treated other people, and lived to the glory of God.

At this point let us consider the question: **How do Zechariah and Elizabeth serve as examples for us regarding the Christian life?**

[*Answer:* They show the relationship between faith and good works. Good works don't make us righteous. Faith alone does. But true faith is never alone, rather good works follow as expressions of love and thanksgiving to God. My mom once said: “Michael, if you want to show your love and thankfulness to me, listen to me and do the dishes when I ask you.” In the same way, our continual obedience to Christ's commands are the way we can express love and thanksgiving in response to his love for us.]

Even though Zechariah and Elizabeth were a righteous and honored couple, there was one problem: ⁷ *But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.*

In order to get the full impact of this verse one needs to understand that – to the Jew – not having children was considered a severe misfortune to the Jew. Children were incredibly important and highly valued – and rightly so – as the Scriptures say: ³ *Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him.* (Psa 127:3)

Most people assumed that being barren was a sign of God’s displeasure – of his punishment because of some misdeed. So imagine the situation: even though Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God, their neighbors probably thought, “They must have done something wrong, they must have sinned badly if God isn’t giving them children.” Elizabeth herself described her inability to have children as a disgrace before the people.

But as we will see, Elizabeth’s being barren was not a sign of God’s displeasure. No, God allowed Elizabeth to be barren so that He might display his loving power. Soon Elizabeth would join the ranks of women like Abraham’s wife Sarah and the Virgin Mary in being a vessel through which God would display the fulfillment of his promises.

Does being a Christian mean that we will get everything we want?

[*Answer:* No, sometimes God withholds things we ask for in prayer – not because we’ve sinned, but rather because he wants to make his power known. Other examples of this in Scripture are: 1) St. Paul and his thorn in the flesh. 2) Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Etc. . .]

⁸ *Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.*

The Jewish historian Josephus – who lived around the time of Jesus – wrote that there were 20,000 priest in Judea. The priest were divided into 24 division and each division was allotted 1 week every 6 months to serve in the temple.

The greatest honor for a priest was to be chosen to burn incense during either the morning or evening sacrifice. A priest was only allowed this service once in his lifetime (if at all), after which he would be considered “rich and holy” for being able to enter offer the incense on the altar that stood right before the Most Holy Place where God dwelled.

During the morning and evening sacrifice a lamb was offered for the sins of Israel – a foreshadowing of the coming Christ. This sacrificial lamb is (most likely) what John the Baptist would later compare Christ to, when He would say: “*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” (John 1:29)

So here is the situation. With much fanfare, trumpets and choirs the lamb chosen for sacrifice was slaughtered. It was prepared, but before it was placed on the altar, Zechariah was to go into the temple (with a large congregation of priests, Levites and other worshippers waiting for him outside) to offer incense on the altar before the LORD which would symbolize the prayers of Israel before God – prayers for mercy and salvation. (Cf. Psalm 141:2)

Before Zechariah went in, the blood of the lamb was sprinkled on the lampstand and altar of incense by other priests. The fire was prepared for the incense (just as it was prepared outside for the burning of the lamb). Now Zechariah was left alone in the Holy Place to offer the incense as the congregation waited outside praying.

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.*

What prayer is the angel referring to?

[*Answer:* At first glance we might assume it is that Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a child. Yes, this prayer was most definitely answered, but it most probably was not the prayer then Angel Gabriel is referring to. Consider the facts: Zechariah is serving in an official capacity as priest. The lamb has been slaughtered for the sins of the people – a foreshadow of the Messiah to come. The people outside are praying for mercy and forgiveness. He is holding the

incense which symbolizes those prayers. He himself was a devote man looking forward to the Messiah. It is crystal clear, then that his prayer would be for forgiveness, for the promised Messiah. This is the prayer that is about to be answered, and Zechariah's son would be the forerunner of the Christ!]

The angel said to him: . . . 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."

The name John means: "The Lord is gracious," and the Lord was most certainly showing his grace with this announcement. Zechariah's son would be the prophet Malachi promised some 400 years previously, when he wrote: *"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me... (Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,)" says the LORD Almighty. . . . 5 "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."* (Malachi 3:1,4:5-6)

Because John would be the forerunner of the Messiah, many would rejoice at his birth. Why? Because his coming meant the Messiah would soon follow. He would be a Nazarene – fully dedicated to the LORD. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit "even from birth" or more accurately, "while yet in his mother's womb." This fact was beautifully demonstrated by when John "leaped" in Elizabeth's womb when pregnant Mary visited her. (Cf. Luke 1:44) He would lead the people to repentance – calling the children, the descendants of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to return to the faith of their forefathers in looking forward to the Messiah for forgiveness.

Why should the news of John's birth still give us joy?

[*Answer:* The message He would proclaim is the same message proclaimed today: Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near. His birth means that Jesus truly is the Messiah – as the Scriptures proclaim.]

Sadly, Zechariah's sinful doubting heart reveals itself. He says: *"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."*

Now, you might be wondering what was so bad about Zechariah's question. Look at the angel's response for the answer. Gabriel stands in the presence of God (something clearly symbolized by his standing right by the altar of incense, in front of the Most Holy Place in the temple) and God commissioned him with this good news. To doubt Gabriel is to doubt God. To question his good news is to question the Gospel. This is why Zechariah is sharply rebuked and rendered silent. This event reminds me of the words spoken by the prophet Zephaniah: ⁷ *Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near. The LORD has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited.* (Zephaniah 1:7)

To be sure, Zechariah's silence was a punishment for his doubt. But it was also a gift of God's grace. His inability to speak was a perpetual reminder to him of what God promised him: Elizabeth will have a son and he will be the one preparing the way for the Messiah.

How does God use bad things in our lives to strengthen our faith?

[*Answer:* To call us to repentance, direct our attention to his promises, get us to rely on him instead of ourselves and get us to look forward to his return to deliver us]

²¹ *Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. They were probably wondering what was taking Zechariah so long – maybe even wondering if the LORD killed him for some sin as he killed Aaron's sons when they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD. (Lev 10:1-2)*

²² *When he came out, he could not speak to them. He could not bless them like he was supposed to. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.*

²³ *When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."*

How do Elizabeth's words summarize what this sermon – and our joy in Christmas – is all about?

[*Answer:* We can apply Elizabeth's words to our own spiritual situation. God has shown favor on us. He has taken away the disgrace of our sins through the birth of his Son. This is all the LORD's doing. We cannot add anything to it. Praise be to the Lord for is indescribable gift]