

Well, as we enter the month of December we find ourselves in the season which traditionally has been called “Advent” which means “arrival or coming.” The Church uses the word ‘Advent’ to describe the four-week period prior to “Christmas.” The word Christmas is a shortened form of “Christ’s mass” – “Christ” which is from Greek *Christos*, a translation of Hebrew for “Messiah” which means “the anointed one”; and *mass* is from Latin word regarding the celebration of the Lord’s Supper/communion - which is the remembering and reflection of Jesus’ crucifixion and death on a cross for the forgiveness of our sins. Christmas is not so much about celebrating the birth of baby as it is the celebrating that God has come to earth in the form of a human being, so He might provide a sacrifice to satisfy the divinely required payment for sin so that we might be forgiven and redeemed and restored back into the relationship with God that we were created for.

The Advent season is the season when we *prepare* the coming of the “gospel” a word which literally means “good news” - and it is “good news” that God came into the world to provide a means by which we can be forgiven, redeemed and restored back to God! The reality is that on the day that Jesus was born almost everyone missed the reality that God had come into the world to rescue and restore a desperately needy and rebellious people from their sin. And sadly, we live in a day where, while many people have still missed the reality that God has come into the world, those of us who know that reality have been so accustomed with that reality, that we’ve become numb to the power and depth and joy and glory of what truly happened on that day. And so, we celebrate Advent so that we are properly *prepared* to celebrate the birth of good news of the gospel on Christmas day.

We see this *preparation*, even before the birth of Jesus, in our text for this morning. Today we take a step away from our study of the book of Acts, and we will spend the next four sermons in the first two chapters of the gospel of Luke, looking at the gospel in the birth of Christ. The key verse to all these messages is Luke 1:68: “*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people!*” God has come; the hope of the gospel has arrived! It is significant that we looking at the gospel of Luke. The gospel of Luke is the only gospel whose author wrote a sequel - the book of Acts. The gospel of Luke tells the story of Christianity from the very beginning— the life of Christ from his birth through his death, resurrection and ascension; and the Acts of the Apostles continues that story: the building of the church and the advance of the gospel after the Spirit came at Pentecost. Today we read the first of the two books that Luke wrote about Jesus. This book is called a gospel.

*Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, 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, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.* Luke 1:1-4

Luke expresses a concern for accuracy as he began his account of the life of Jesus. He drew on previously written narratives of Jesus’ life. He interviewed people who were eyewitnesses and he interacted with people who ministered with Jesus. Luke was a medical doctor and he wrote with the precision and sensitivity of a physician. Luke was also Greek, and his words reveal that artistic sensitivity. Luke addressed his writing to “*Theophilus*.” We don’t know anything about him except that his name means “Lover of God” and that he had been “*taught*” some “*things*” about Jesus.

*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. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.* Luke 1:5-7

Here we read of the context of the coming of the gospel into the world. At the time of Jesus birth, Herod was the King of Judea. He was the first Jewish king to sit on the throne since the fall of Israel over 580 years before. During those years, the Jews suffered under the heavy hands of the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Egyptians, and Syrians. And even now, in the days that Luke wrote of, the nation of Israel was still not free. Herod was not a real king of Israel; he was merely a puppet, put there by the authority of Rome. King Herod was a corrupt, perverted degenerate, leader - and the nation reflected his immorality. Herod introduced Roman temples into the land and had idols built to Roman gods. He encouraged Babylonian immigration and introduced the Roman games into Israel. Gentile money flooded the country, causing great economic instability. Even the priesthood was corrupt; there was much buying and selling of priestly offices. These were desperate times in Israel, times of spiritual darkness, weariness, injustice, disease, and economic desperation.

But in the midst of all that darkness and corruption, Luke introduces us to a simple, faithful couple, an elderly priest and his wife, who are described as *“righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.”* Wouldn't most of us like to be described that way? Well its clear this is a *special* couple because Luke mentions them - but we also know they were an *ordinary* couple, because God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things. We know that both Zechariah and Elizabeth from the tribe of Aaron, which means they would have had been raised in homes of priestly families who served the temple in Jerusalem. We also read that they both had been special names by their parents, as Zechariah means "Yahweh remembers" and Elizabeth means "the oath of God." In naming them in this way, their parents were appealing to God's character and God's word, that God would be true to his promises throughout their children's lives.

"Yahweh remembers" and "the oath of God" would have been Zechariah and Elizabeth's identity. Their marriage together would have been seen as a great blessing to their families. It was considered a double honor from the Lord to marry a virgin from a priestly family. But their hope and rejoicing would have quickly faded as it became evident that Elizabeth could not have children. Her barrenness would have been seen as a punishment from God for some sort of grievous sin she had committed. She would be the object of scorn, humiliation and shame, and the subject of gossip. Zechariah and Elizabeth had lived with this throughout their married life, yet they still clearly were under God's favor, as they are described as, *“righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.”* God was preparing them for the coming of the gospel.

*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. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. 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.* Luke 1:8-12

At this time it is believed that there were numerous, probably thousands, of priests in the nation of Israel, because there was a priest on duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. They worked in teams and in shifts, and each team was scheduled to serve twice a year for one week in the temple in Jerusalem. We read that now it was Zechariah's turn to perform the priestly duties in the temple. It's also believed that, although Luke doesn't mention it, this must be some high season of worship or festival, because the burning of incense at the altar of incense was normally done only on high and holy days. By the tradition of casting of lots, Zechariah was chosen to be the one who is to enter *“the temple of the Lord”* to *“burn incense.”* Considering the number of priests in Israel, this could have been the high point of Zechariah's service as a priest. As he stands at the altar before the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, Zechariah begins to pray in concert with *“the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.”* And as he does so an angel of God appears before Zechariah standing at one end of the altar *“and fear fell upon him.”*

*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, 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. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 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."* Luke 1:13-17

As usual, when an angel of God appears before someone in the Bible, the first words out of the angel's mouth are, "*Do not be afraid.*" Well, yeah! Of course, Zechariah would be afraid. We all would be afraid. I would venture a guess not too many of us are expecting an angel to appear at any time in our life; that would be true for Zechariah also. But this would have been cause for greater fear for Zechariah. He was standing in what was considered in his day to be the most sacred place on earth, and an angel of God appears. Zechariah also knew that when this kind of thing happens, something drastic and dramatic is going to happen to the one to whom the angel appears to.

*"Do not be afraid, Zechariah."* The angel addresses Zechariah by name, to calm his fears. *"For your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John."* The initial intent and impact of this statement is focused on the prayers Zechariah and Elizabeth had been painfully and earnestly praying for years: *"Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son."* This must have had stunningly joyful impact on Zechariah, as it is for all who struggle to have children. *"And you shall call his name John."* The name "John" means "God is gracious." And so, a father named "Yahweh remembers" and a mother named "the Oath of God" are to be gifted with a baby boy whose name is "God is gracious." The angel says, too, that this boy's birth will have a very immediate personal impact on both Zechariah and Elizabeth: *"You will have joy and gladness."* The theme of rejoicing and gladness is repeated time and time again all throughout the gospel of Luke.

It's here where we see the *greater* intent and impact of the angel's statement that their prayers had been heard in the words: *"And many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord."* What is the greater prayer that Zechariah and Elizabeth and nation of Israel had been praying for, over the past 580 years? The prayer that God would fulfill His promise to send a Savior into the world to rescue His people and restore them back to God. What greater joy and gladness is there than being blessed with the birth of a child? The greater joy and gladness of being rescued by God and chosen by God to be a child of God by being and born and adopted into the family of God.

The prayers of Zechariah the priest for the salvation of Israel and for the deliverance of his people, would be answered – and it would begin through the answered prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth for a son, who name would be called "John" which means "God is gracious." Zechariah and Elizabeth would know *"joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth"* because "John" would be an instrument of "God's grace" in preparing the world for the coming of the long-awaited Savior. Luke repeats the theme of rejoicing and gladness so often in his gospel because Luke knew that Jesus would bring joy and gladness to people – and that would begin with Zechariah and Elizabeth.

The angel describes the spiritual character of "*John*" in that God has already determined John's effectiveness *"will be great."* From conception John would be filled up and controlled by the Holy Spirit. John's life will be one of a single-minded purpose; he would be spiritually disciplined for God's use. His sole ministry will be that of preparation for the coming of the Messiah: *"And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 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"* (Luke 1:16-17). These words are an echo the of words of the prophet Isaiah. Luke uses the exact same words in Luke 3:2-6 to describe the ministry of John.

*The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,*

*“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:*

*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*

*Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low,*

*and the crooked shall become straight,*

*and the rough places shall become level ways,*

*and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”* Luke 3: 2-6

The words of the angel in Luke 1:16-17 also echo the last written prophetic word from God spoken 400 years spoken through the prophet Malachi:

*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. 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.* Malachi 4:5-6:

John would come in the same spirit and power as the “great” Old Testament prophet Elijah. John was coming to restore the purity of Old Testament faith in God and His promise to send a Messiah - and to turn a generation of rebellious children back to the faith of their fathers Abraham, Moses, Isaac and Jacob, to prepare their hearts for the coming of the gospel of Jesus Christ. God always sovereignly and faithfully fulfills the promises of His Word in His ways and in His time. Consider that the people of God in the nation of Israel had been under the heavy hand of foreign powers for over 580 years, and they had not heard a word from God for 400 years. But now, an angel of the Lord appears to Zechariah and announces that God is coming. Get ready; be prepared!

*And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” 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. 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.” And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. 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.* Luke 1:18-22

At this point, Zechariah is not thinking so much about the coming Messiah, but rather about the promise that his wife Elizabeth will bear him a son. What began as fear had by now grown into full-blown unbelief: “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” The angel responds by saying: “I am Gabriel.” The name “Gabriel” means “the power of God.” Gabriel is saying: “I represent the power of God. It is by God’s power you will have a son.” Gabriel also says: “I stand in the presence of God.” This is the same angel Gabriel the Old Testament prophet Daniel saw with the host of heaven 600 years ago. Gabriel is saying: “I represent presence of God. God will always be with you.” Gabriel also said, “I was sent to speak to you.” Gabriel is saying: “I represent the word of God. He is speaking to you through me.” And Gabriel also told Zechariah that he was sent, “to bring you this good news.” Gabriel is saying: “What I just told you is good news. You *should be* experiencing joy and gladness.” In the words that follow, Gabriel rebukes Zechariah for questioning God rather than praising God - and that because of his unbelief, God will give him a sign of His power, His presence, His word and His promise by taking his ability to talk away from him during Elizabeth’s pregnancy: “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.” God is sovereign and God is gracious. God’s promises will come to pass despite our fearful unbelief.

*And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."* Luke 1:23--25

After his two weeks of service Zechariah leaves Jerusalem. Gabriel's strong rebuke must have gotten through to him because he was obedient to what God told him. He went back to the privacy his own home and spent time with his wife, and we read that, "*after these days his wife Elizabeth conceived.*" That was an act of faith, an act of obedience on Zechariah's part. Elizabeth becomes pregnant. Her response is very different from Zechariah's first response of unbelief. Hers is a beautiful prayer of gratitude: "*Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.*" God was preparing them for the coming of the gospel of Jesus.

The words we have looked at this morning, written by Luke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, give us a divine perspective of history which sees all of history as a part of the God's sovereign plan. God is always providentially at work, from the very beginning of history, to its conclusion. Luke views the birth and the life of Christ as a part of God's redemptive plan and purpose for history. What God's Word is telling us is that Jesus Christ is the central theme to all of history. Everything in life can and should be viewed in terms of its relationship to Jesus. Herod, one of the great and powerful figures of that day, is barely mentioned because he was not a barrier to the plan of God. Herod is only a chronological point of reference to Luke in his gospel. On the other hand, Zacharias and Elizabeth, while they may have been much too ordinary to be given any attention by secular historians, are most highly significant to Luke because they played an decidedly significant role in the appearance and the ultimate ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What this means is that we are not to live our lives for ourselves, because we are a part of the bigger plan of God. There is so much in our lives that we think we understand but we don't. We are too often so focused on our agendas that we have no time for His. In the midst of our normal, everyday, up-and-down, back and forth lives, sometimes God reaches down and decides to place us in the middle of God's grand eternal story He is writing about the love, mercy, grace, forgiveness, redemption, transformation and restoration that is hard-wired into the gospel of Jesus Christ. In spite of all of their struggles, Zechariah and Elizabeth continued to be faithful day after day - and God swept them up into the beauty and power of the story that He was writing. God can do that with us too. He can write us into chapters of His story in ways we could never understand or imagine, if we will simply *STOP* and in faith live our lives in the larger context of what God is doing. Two significant statements in the first chapter of Luke tell us that Elizabeth and Zacharias were "*righteous before God*" (1:6) and that John would be "*great before Lord*" (1:15). What this means is that the divine history of God measures the righteousness and greatness of humanity in terms of God's evaluation, not ours. In the end, it matters not what people think of us or our work or our place in life or our righteousness or our greatness. What matters most of all is what God thinks. God's Word tell us every man, woman, and child will someday stand before God and be judged by Him. The purpose of Jesus coming to earth was to reveal God's righteousness to us, so that he would then offer us that righteousness in place of our rebellious sin. The gospel of Jesus Christ offers us salvation and eternal life, in place of condemnation and eternal death. When all is said and done, God's approval or God's rejection is the only thing that matters in all of life. Jesus came to the earth so that we could be approved by God, not by who we are or by what we do - but rather by receiving who Jesus is and what he did on the cross. I pray you have found that favor with God, through faith in the person of God's Son, Jesus Christ. That is what the Gospel is all about. If you do not know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, I pray this message has prepared you to do so. And those of us who do know Jesus had better prepare for his second coming - because our story is still being written. God is sovereign and God is gracious. God's promises will come to pass despite our fearful unbelief.