

In His Way, in His Time, and to whom He Chooses
Our Coming Savior – Part I (Luke 1:1-25)
December 6, 2015

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

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 righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.⁷ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

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.

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 call him 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 before he is born.¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel 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 parents 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 said to him, "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 appointed time."

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. 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."

Luke 1:1-25 (NIV)

While last Sunday was the first official Sunday of Advent on the Christmas calendar, this morning is the beginning of our Christmas series entitled *Our Coming Savior*. Actually the Christian definition of Advent has two primary meanings: 1) the coming into being; and 2) waiting. Advent is about both the coming into being of the promised Messiah and the waiting for his return.

When we read the Bible as a story from beginning to end it's pretty easy to go right from the end of the Old Testament, the Book of Malachi, into the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew as if no time elapsed. But that is not the case. There is actually a period of hundreds of years known as the intertestamental period (from about 400 B.C. to the birth of Christ), sometimes called the "silent" years. They are called "silent" only because the people of Israel, God's supposed chosen people, heard nothing from God. For the Jewish people in their life here on earth it was anything but silent. It was a period of great social upheaval, perhaps more than at any time in their history:

- They go from a time of being ruled by the Medo-Persian Empire.
- To a time of different kingdoms vying for control. A time in which they were stripped of their ability to worship and just the mere fact of being found practicing the Sabbath, or the act of circumcision, or being found in possession of the O.T. Scriptures was punishable by death.
- Then there was the Macabbean Revolt, still celebrated by Jews today as Hanukkah, when the Jews violently rose up and recaptured their temple and were able to worship their God. But that would be short lived.
- Only to be ruled again by the Roman Empire who put Herod the Great as King over Palestine and Jerusalem. The Jews were once again under oppressive control.

By the time we get to the end of the Intertestamental Period, many, if not most of the Israelites had to feel that their God had abandoned them. Things had not been going well. Though they lived in and around their promised city, Jerusalem, they were ruled by the Roman Empire. For those who were still hoping that their Messiah would come, it was going to be a military one who would overturn the empire and put the Israelites in charge.

It is no coincidence that God decided to enter into this world at this very specific time in history. It is no coincidence that he appeared through the angel Gabriel to Zechariah & Elizabeth. God's hand is all over the story. First of all just in their names. Names in the Bible have great significance. Names in the Bible often carry with it that person's destiny or their primary character trait. The name Zechariah means "God remembers" and the name Elizabeth means "God is my oath." Just the meaning of their names should give us some idea that they play a significant role in the story God coming to earth in the form of Jesus Christ.

Then it says, "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. That tells us that both Zechariah and Elizabeth came from the priestly lines. In biblical days, Jewish people held the priests in highest esteem. But Zechariah & Elizabeth were even more than that, they were the cream of the crop: "They were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord." Were they perfect? No, but they were pretty good.

They had one little problem. Not in the NIV but in almost all the other Bible versions it says that “Elizabeth was barren.” To say someone was “barren” in biblical times brought both sorrow and shame. The reality of infertility in couples lives carries with it very painful emotions and it was as real in Elizabeth’s day as it is for women today. But in biblical days it was even worse because it carried with it much shame. Most thought it was the result of sin in one’s life and they equated a barren womb with death. “Barren” is actually a terrible word to describe the condition of being childless. “Barren” was the word for land that produced nothing. However, Elizabeth would not be the first woman we read about in the Bible who was described as “barren.” But I am sure that by the time Elizabeth got to this point in her life, there is no way that she could connect her own condition to that of Sarah or Hannah in the Old Testament scriptures. She just knew that she wasn’t able to have children and in a very significant and personal way God had abandoned her. In much the same way it seemed like He had abandoned His people.

Our Scripture story this morning tells us that Zechariah was a priest who served as a member of the priestly division known as Abijah. Actually the priestly divisions go all the way back to King David who organized the priests into twenty-four different divisions. Hundreds of years later we find Zechariah serving in the eighth division known as Abijah. Each of the twenty-four divisions rotated throughout the year and the priests from that division would come from all over Palestine to Jerusalem to serve in all the different roles in the temple, for one week at a time. About twice a year the priests from each of the divisions would get the opportunity to serve. But here is an interesting fact, scholars estimate that during the time in which Zechariah served as a priest, there were approximately 20,000 Jewish priests among the twenty-four different divisions. Now math was not one of my best subjects in school, but if I have it figured out right, each division had about 800-1000 priests who would come and serve on their specific week. Out of those 800 -1000, two would have the privilege to serve in the most noblest of duties, the burning of the incense at the altar inside the Holy Place in the temple, one in the morning and one in the evening. The way they would determine which of the 800-1000 priests would have that privilege was a method known as the casting of lots. It would be like taking a big basket, putting the 800-1000 names in, and drawing one name out. The chances of your name being drawn was quite small.

This was most likely Zechariah’s once in a lifetime chance to serve God in the Holiest place. It was the culmination of his life’s training and responsibilities, that which the great majority of priests in his day never experienced. So with those odds, I ask you, “do you really think it was just a coincidence that the angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah on that day?” And it wasn’t just any angel, it was the angel Gabriel, the angel whom God used to share his most important messages.

Zechariah’s response to 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 said to him, “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 appointed time.”*
Luke 1:18b-20 (NIV)

Something about this story that never really occurred to me before coming to my attention as I was preparing for this morning's message: Zechariah get the raw deal here. He questions the angel Gabriel when he announces "you're going to be a father," and he gets his mouth shut for nine months.

Just a little further ahead in Luke's Gospel we get the story of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary (that which we are going to look at next week), announcing she is going to be a mother. Mary too questions the angel, "how can this be, I'm a virgin?" And she gets a free choir performance from the great heavenly host! Hardly seems fair!

When you think about it, what God gave Zechariah was one great big "time out." Any of you kids here this morning ever get a time out from your mom or dad? I always got time out's from my mom, never a time out from my dad. I wish I had got time out's from my dad! But how long do you think the average time out is? Five minutes? But boy, those five minutes seem like an eternity. Zechariah got nine months! The Israelites as a people had gotten 400 years! Remember that the next time you think God has abandoned you or you just haven't heard from Him in some time. I am sorry to break this to you but God's time frame is not anywhere close to our time frames.

Even when we don't hear from him or see him working, God is working in each of our lives, especially for the good of those who love Him, just as He has been working in the lives of all people throughout human history. From the very beginning of the story of human history God has been authoring a story that leads to salvation, deliverance and rescue for all people who call upon His Holy Name. That really is what Christmas is about. It is about the advent – or the arrival of God. He is following through on his promise and oath to bring a deliverer – a Messiah. He's bringing a people who are in darkness into the marvelous light.

The angel Gabriel says to Zechariah, "don't be afraid your prayer has been heard." So what prayer of Zechariah's had been heard? You see I am thinking that by now, at this stage of their lives, well beyond child bearing years, Zechariah & Elizabeth stopped praying that prayer for a son or a daughter of their own a long time ago.

You see the angel of the Lord is really announcing to Zechariah the answer to two of his and Elizabeth's greatest prayers. To their surprise, and everybody else's, he is announcing the answer to their prayer of many years ago, a child of their own. But the angel of the Lord is also answering an even greater prayer that Zechariah and Elizabeth had as faithful and righteous Jews, and that was for the advent of the promised Messiah for the Israelite people.

God was about to answer both prayers through a faithful married couple who were advanced in years – just as he did for Abraham and Sarah so many years earlier. Why? Well it seems that we ask that question a lot, even for those of us who claim to have faith in God. "Why God, why?" And then we ask another question a lot, "when God, when?"

The one thing that seems very clear throughout the entire Bible is that more often than not, God makes His people wait. He makes us wait. Things happen in God's time – not our own.

A little bit later in the Christmas story in the Gospel of Luke (1:26-27) we read of a righteous and devout man by the name of Simeon who was waiting for the consolation of Israel. It says: *It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts.* And he waited and waited and waited. Simeon probably waited in the temple courts most of his adult life. Finally, just before he is about to die he was able to see the baby Jesus as he was being presented in the temple by his mother and father.

Elizabeth and Sarah had to wait to have children until they were both old women. Can you imagine having to run after a five year old when you're one hundred years old, or even fifty-five? I've discovered that one of the best things about grand parenting, is that they get to go home. There is a reason why God blesses most of us with children at young ages.

Elizabeth and Zechariah, both from the priestly lineage, were about to give birth to a very special baby, who was given to them not just for the two of them, but for the whole nation of Israel, and for all of God's people to come, for a very important reason. What was and is that reason?

Well, part of it is explained in his name. Most good, righteous, and faithful Jews would have named their first born son after their father. Especially one that had been waited for for so long, and probably a pretty good chance there was no others to follow. He should have been named Zechariah. But the angel of the Lord said, "no, you are to give him the name John." Zechariah means "God remembers." Well we don't need that anymore because God has already given proof that He remembers. The child's name will be John – that which means "God has been gracious." This child who will both fulfill prophecy and speak prophecy will break with the Jewish tradition extending hope even beyond the Jews.

Then the angel of the Lord explained to Zechariah what the child was going to be like and what he was going to do: ¹⁶*He will bring back many of the people of Israel 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 parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*" Luke 1:14-17 (NIV)

Very similar words to that which was prophesied hundreds of years earlier by the prophet Isaiah: *A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.* Isaiah 40:3 (NIV)

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

Zechariah asked for a sign and the angel Gabriel gave him one he would not soon forget. He silenced Zechariah until the birth of his son. This made it impossible for Zechariah to perform one of the most important tasks involved in the role of going into the temple and burning the incense to God. After the priest finished placing the incense on the altar and offered his prayers inside the temple, he would exit the temple and pronounce the famous prayer and benediction over the people that goes all the way back to the first priest, Aaron, recorded in Numbers 6:24-26,

May the Lord bless you and keep you; May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Many of the Israelite people gathered around the temple each day, morning and evening, just to receive that blessing when the priest on duty exited the holiest of holies. On that specific day, as they were waiting and wondering what was the delay, and when Zechariah came out and was unable to speak to them, they realized that something very significant had happened, and that Zechariah had received a vision in the temple.

Did they know what it meant? No. At this point Zechariah and Elizabeth had no idea what it all meant. They knew that they had finally been blessed with a son, and that he was the one whom Scripture had promised would come preparing the way for the Consolation of Israel, but they didn't know the way he was going to do that. The idea that the Jews themselves needed a personal Savior and that each needed to repent for their own sinfulness and to put their faith in that Messiah for salvation, that would have been unthinkable.

Why John the Baptist? Why Zechariah & Elizabeth? Why not just Mary & Joseph and Jesus? Because in God's sovereignty he has included repentance, that which John the Baptist represents, as a necessary part of the salvation process.

A little further ahead in Luke's gospel it says that as John was beginning his ministry, that which had been prophesied hundreds of years before, that which was to prepare the way, God's way, for the Savior, "he went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

It says in Matthew and Mark's gospel that at the beginning of Jesus' ministry he went into Galilee, proclaiming the Good News of God. "The time has come (the time has arrived!) the kingdom of God is near (it's here!). Repent and believe the good news.

Contrary to what many say today, belief is not enough. Belief and faith has to be accompanied by repentance. Repentance is the continued acknowledgement of our own sinfulness, our need for a Savior, and the continual turning from that sin.

What God did for Israel through John the Baptist he does for us today through Advent. Advent is our time of preparation for the coming Savior, not just the celebration of His first coming but most importantly His second coming. Not just during the Christmas season but all the time during our life here on earth.

How do we prepare? I would like to offer four suggestions to help us prepare for *Our Coming Savior* this Advent & Christmas season:

1. Meditate on the fact that we all need a Savior: No matter how good you think you might be, we all fall short, very far short of God's requirement for our personal salvation. We need to call sin, sin and stop glossing over those things in our lives that we give excuses for:, like, "well, it's not really that bad," "everybody else is doing it," "it's just who I am," "oh, everybody is going to be saved." We also need to recognize that while we can pretty easily see the sin in others, there is unseen sin in all of us.

2. Engage in self examination: King David who is credited by God as having a heart like his wrote in Psalm 139:23-24 - “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any offensive way in me, and lead me to life everlasting.” The truth is God already knows my heart, my thoughts, the evil that is within me. I need to search for myself.
3. Be in the Bible. The Bible itself says that God has given us everything that is needed for salvation and eternal life in His Word. The trouble is that for many of us we think we have salvation and eternal life and we have never really immersed ourselves into His Word.
4. Build God-centered anticipation and expectancy into this season. I say God centered because so much of what we do during the Christmas season is really not about God at all. If someone from the outside were to observe you during this Christmas season, would they say you’re more excited about the material things, family things, decoration things, food things, or the Christ thing?

In Zechariah’s great song, our Call to Worship for this morning, he kind of gets the order mixed up. It first should be John the Baptist and his message of repentance and then Jesus and the salvation event itself. All God’s plan, in His Way, in His Time and to Whom He Chooses.

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), Luke 1:68-70 (NIV)