

A Call to Prepare
The Call of Christmas – I
November 27, 2016

Scripture – Luke 1:1-25

This morning we begin our Advent/Christmas series entitled “The Call of Christmas.” We begin in the Gospel of Luke which contains the majority of the first Christmas story and it comes in the form of a letter to a man named Theophilus. We don’t really know the specifics about Theophilus. The only thing we know is that the writer of the gospel of Luke was writing a well-researched account of the story of Jesus for his friend, Theophilus, as well as any others who likely would read the story. Did the writer of the Gospel of Luke know that it would be as story that would be read by others for 2,000 years?

The original Christmas story was one that was shared orally, by the original witnesses. In the day they did not have printed newspapers or books, television, or radio, nor internet or facebook to share stories, so they had to be shared orally, passed on from one person to another, from one town to the next. They really couldn’t fudge on the details because many of the original witnesses were still around. For the first gospel writer, believed to be Mark, the story of Jesus’ birth did not seem to be important. His story starts with the John the Baptist as an adult preparing the way in the wilderness for the adult Jesus. Mark was mostly concerned about Jesus’ life, his death on the cross and his resurrection. Matthew’s gospel contains only a little of the story of Jesus’ birth. So, along comes Luke who desires to give a very well researched, orderly account, probably interviewing as many of the firsthand witnesses as he could find, of the story of Jesus’ life and he begins not only with the story of the birth of Jesus but even before that. He begins with the story of an angel.

Today, we usually dismiss the stories of angels, which is pretty interesting because the Bible speaks about angels almost as much as God’s Holy Spirit. More than 300 times the Bible speaks about angels at God’s command, countless angels. Biblical scholars estimate that it could be more than a million. The Bible says that God has commissioned these angels to aid His children in their struggles against Satan. Interestingly we trust what the Bible says about the work and the power of the Holy Spirit, as well as Satan in the world today, but we usually dismiss God’s work through angels. Why is that? One of my favorite songs, from many years ago now, a song which is played today only at Christmas time, by the country music group Alabama, is “Angels Among Us.”

While we pretty easily dismiss the possibility of “Angels Among Us” today, there is biblical precedent: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*
Hebrews 13:2

In other words you may have been visited by an angel, or many of them throughout your lifetime, and you didn’t even know it. If we don’t believe in angels than why do we sing so many songs during the Christmas season that talk about angels? More than 40 years ago now, Billy Graham wrote a book entitled, Angels: God’s Secret Agents. In it he says, “I believe in angels because the Bible says there are angels; and I believe the Bible to be the true Word of God.” Oh, if only God’s people could take God’s Word to be as simple and true today!

The story of the birth of Jesus recorded by the writer of the Gospel of Luke begins with an angel and an old man, but not just any angel, nor just any old man. “The Call of Christmas” begins with angelic messengers sent directly by the Lord God Almighty to speak to and through a select group of people.

The “Call of Christmas” begins with a man by the name of Zechariah, whom we are told is a priest, of the division of Abijah. We are also told that he had a wife, named Elizabeth, who was from the daughters of Aaron – which means both Zechariah and Elizabeth were Jews, Israelites, and both of them were from the lineage of priests, those who were set apart by God. for God’s service among God’s people. Of course, Zechariah being the man, is the only one of the who could serve in the temple. And if that wasn’t enough, it says, “they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.” Commendation from God regarding one’s character does not get any better than that. For serious students of the Scriptures, this should not have surprised them, because it was prophesied that God would first send the Messiah for His own people.

So we have this poster couple of what it means to be faithful to God, probably not just in their local synagogue, but in their community, and in their marriage as well. However there was deep sadness in their hearts and judgement from others who looked upon their life together, because they had been unable to have children. In that day, not being able to have children was viewed as a curse from God, the result of sin in the man or woman’s life.

For a Jewish woman not to be able to have a child in that day, well most of us probably can’t grasp the significance of that today. While some women today choose not to have children, in that day being able to bear a child was the greatest privilege God could give a Jewish woman.

For those women who want to have children today, it’s something we just take for granted – that is until a woman who wants to have a child can’t have one, and then it’s devastating. It was even more devastating in Elizabeth and Zechariah’s day. By the time we get to this point in the life of Zechariah and Elizabeth, they are beyond childbearing years. While they had probably prayed to God for many years to have a child, they are beyond praying that specific prayer anymore. That dream for Zechariah and Elizabeth was long gone.

Yet, they continued to live faithful lives before their God. Zechariah would invest 50 weeks of the year in his home town teaching and serving in the local synagogue. But, two weeks out of the year he and all the other priests who were part of the division of Abijah (that which probably numbered in the hundreds), had to head to Jerusalem to serve in and around the temple and perform the various priestly duties.

During that time of service, the highest duty, that which occurred only twice a day, once in the early morning and once in the late afternoon, or early evening, one priest would enter the most Holy Place of the temple and burn the incense on the altar. It was something that went all the way back to the original establishment of the Ark of the Covenant in Exodus 30. The way they selected the one priest who had the awesome responsibility to burn the incense was by a method known as the casting of lots. It was like one big lottery with the names of the hundreds of priests put into a big basket and only one name drawn. Whether one could be picked more than once for

this awesome privilege and responsibility, we don't know, but the chances of being picked even once were rather small. This was most likely the culmination of Zechariah's lifetime of training and priesthood responsibilities.

On this very special day in the life of one of God's most faithful servants, the "Call of Christmas" would come to Zechariah. Zechariah was about to encounter an angel and be given the "Call to Prepare." In this, the first "Call of Christmas," just like Zechariah was no ordinary Jew, this angel was no ordinary angel. This was the angel Gabriel. Gabriel is primarily God's messenger of mercy and promise. He appears four times in the Bible, always bearing good news. Interestingly, one of the times in which Gabriel appeared before Daniel, Daniel records this:

While I was speaking in prayer, Gabriel, whom I had seen in the former vision, came near to me and touched me about the time of the evening sacrifice. Daniel 9:21

Sounds amazingly similar to the place and time the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah.

Earlier in the vision Gabriel had given Daniel he shared how history would culminate in the return of Christ. The announcements of the angel Gabriel of the unfolding plans and purposes of God are of monumental importance.

Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah was to be monumental, not only for the Jewish people, but eventually for the entire world, and for Zechariah himself, along with his wife Elizabeth:

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." Luke 1:13b – 17 (ESV)

The angel Gabriel first appears in the New Testament to the righteous and blameless Jewish priest Zechariah, he announces the birth of John the Baptist and describes his life and ministry as the forerunner of Jesus. The "Call of Christmas" from Gabriel to Zechariah is a "Call to Prepare" the way for the Messiah and his upcoming arrival. On this, the first Sunday of Advent, that is the call to all of us. Unfortunately most of us will not answer the call. We would rather stay busy with our own lives and the fast paced life of the world around us.

What was Zechariah's response to the angel Gabriel's presence and words? Shocked, to say the least, fearful to say the most. "How shall I know this," responds Zechariah. "Behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." Think about this, Elizabeth is not even pregnant yet. More than nine months Zechariah will be silent. Was Zechariah's silence a good thing or a bad thing? Was it really a punishment? I think Zechariah needed nine months of silence just to take all this in. How was he going to tell his wife Elizabeth? How were all the other people going to know what had just taken place?

“The Call of Christmas” to Zechariah was all about preparation. And now he could not speak:

²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² 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 1:21-22 (ESV)

Perhaps Zechariah was good at the game of charades. In the day they didn't have pen and paper. When you get home today, in the privacy of your house, try communicating to your family by waving your hands and arms around that an angel met you in the temple as you were presenting the incense offering on the altar. Try communicating to your mother, or better yet your grandmother that she soon is going to have a child. Let me know how that goes. Zechariah knew it was no charade. It wasn't just the bright light and voice of the angel Gabriel. Not being able to speak was affirmation that the call was from God.

The first Call of Christmas had been received. With all the people standing around when Zechariah came out, it wasn't long before word started making its way through the streets of Jerusalem, how Zechariah, the old priest had encountered an angel. Now it was time for Zechariah to go home and tell his wife and to begin preparing for John's arrival:

²³ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. ²⁴ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ²⁵ “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

The first Call of Christmas could not have happened to a more deserving couple. In a quiet moment of doing his job, an angel appeared during Zechariah's workday in the temple and speaks his message from God. Throughout this series we will see that “The Call of Christmas” comes to ordinary people doing their ordinary jobs in their ordinary lives, and most trying to be faithful to God and one another through it all. As N.T. Wright (one of the most respected theologians today) writes; “This story is about much more than Zechariah's joy of having a son at last or Elizabeth's exultation of being freed from the scorn of all the other mother's in the village for not being able to have a child. It is about the great fulfillment of God's promises and purposes. But the needs, hopes and fears of ordinary people are not forgotten in this larger story, precisely because of who Israel's God is – the God of lavish, self-giving love. . . . When God acts on the large scale, he takes care of smaller human concerns as well.”

What was Zechariah's response to all of this? Well, being a good faithful Jewish priest, he knew it was about a lot more than just he and Elizabeth. It was about a lot more than their son to be born, John the Baptist. Zechariah knew that this was the beginning of something special. This was the beginning of the fulfillment of God working in human history. So much so that when John is finally born, and Zechariah finally gets his voice back, he breaks into song praising God:

*⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us*

*in the house of his servant David,
70 as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
71 that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
72 to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
73 the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
74 that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

The Bible tells us that God speaks more often to those who are ready to listen, to those who have prepared themselves. Advent is all about preparing ourselves for God coming into the world, not just into the big world, but the small world of our ordinary lives. So I have a question for you this morning:

What are you going to do to prepare for the [second] coming of Christ this Advent season?

My guess is, we are no more prepared for Jesus' second coming than the people in the original Christmas story were prepared for his first coming. The only difference between the two is that the consequences for those who are not prepared for his second coming are much more serious. Upon Jesus' second coming, there will be no more waiting, no more time to get prepared. My prayer is that during this Advent season we may each take the time to prepare ourselves.

Let us Pray:

Lord God,

This is a very monumental time that we find ourselves in. A time in which we see the brokenness and sin of the world all around us. A time in which you tell us in your Word is just the beginning. The birth pangs of something much greater to come. During this season, may you help us to prepare for Jesus' coming again, first into our own hearts and then for his return to the world, when you will set all things right and anew. May we respond to the first "Call of Christmas," first proclaimed by Zechariah and Elizabeth's son, John the Baptist, and then reiterated by your own Son, Jesus: "Repent, repent from your sinful ways and return to me, and believe in the Good News!" In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

