

“WHAT CHILD IS THIS? ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH’S SON JOHN.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

December 20, 2020, 9 and 10:30 AM

Text for the Sermon: Luke 1:5-25; 57-66

Prayer: Holy Father, help us to hear the Word that became flesh, help us to see Jesus and to delight more in Him than in anything the world has to offer, more than all the world has to offer.

Introduction.

We turn this morning from the OT to the NT, and specifically to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it is told by Dr. Luke. Luke sets out to tell us the story of Jesus. But he does it in a unique way among the four Gospels.

He doesn't start with Jesus' baptism the way Mark does (and for the most part John).

He doesn't start with Jesus' birth the way Matthew does.

He backs up and starts with the foretelling of the birth of John the Baptist.

Why does Luke back up to get a running start at his subject?

To understand that you have to understand something about the times. Up to this point there had been 400 years of silence when the voice of God had not been heard in the land. The oldest person alive at this time could not remember a time even in his earliest childhood when a prophet had spoken the Word of God.

There had not been proclaimed, “Thus saith the Lord” in four centuries. For a people who had an old book that recorded a thousand years' worth of prophetic proclamations and words from the Lord, this famine for the Word of God was exceedingly long and exceedingly painful. When heaven is silent people languish and despair.

The last words of the prophet Malachi on the last page of the OT 400 years before had been:

Malachi 4:5-6 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. 6 And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers.

And so the people of God prayed and waited, and waited and prayed for the consolation of Israel and the salvation of the Lord. They waited for the fulfilling of God's greatest promise, for God's choicest prophecy, the seed that would crush the head of the serpent, the offspring that would bless all the nations of the earth (Genesis 3:15; 22:18).

Luke begins his story at the moment in history when God breaks the silence with the announcement of the birth of a baby. God has been setting the stage for this time.

An alien world is breaking into our world. Heaven has come down to earth. This is not a closed universe with no one out there. There is a God, and He is there, and He is not silent.

As with the previous babies, God is announcing He is moving, He is up to something, something utterly unique, something only the sovereign living God would do. But there is something different. God doubles down for the biggest revelation of all. He sends a baby ahead to prepare for another baby.

Luke 1:5-25, birth of John foretold.

Israel was enslaved under Herod and Roman rule, and now as in Egypt, a baby is born who will be the forerunner of the Messiah who will lead God's people out of spiritual slavery.

Zechariah.

We are introduced to Zechariah, a priest, whose division is on duty for two weeks to minister in the temple in Jerusalem. One of the duties was to burn incense twice a day, morning and evening, at the altar of incense in the Holy Place. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity. A one in 20,000 chance, that was determined by casting lots.

Proverbs 16:33 The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

Speaking of decisions from the Lord. We are told:

Luke 1:6-7 They were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child.

How do you reconcile they were righteous and blameless before God; faithful, good, godly servants and they had no child? Why does God treat His children like this?

Along with the heavy burden God laid on the people of Israel by His 400 years of silence, He laid a heavy trial on Zechariah and Elizabeth with His silence to their prayer for a child.

We have heard those words four times now. Unless you have had that burden yourself, you cannot really understand the full force of how heavy a weight that is. In Bible times it was the bitterest of sorrows as we saw in Hannah's heart last week. God lays some of His most severe providences on His best people like righteous and blameless Zechariah and Elizabeth.

This is the providence of God. God planned for John to be born under exceptional circumstances in order to display His exceptional grace and glory. God's mercies are sweetest that come out of painful trials.

Gabriel.

Right away we are alert to something important happening, an angel of the Lord appears. And not just any angel, but the archangel Gabriel who ministers in the very presence of God.

We can't help but take notice of all the angels in the incarnation story, announcing the births of John and Jesus, and then coming again at the birth of Jesus. There is an important message in this. The Messiah is not an angel of the Lord, but the Lord of the angels. Jesus is far above and superior to the angels.

We are told Gabriel came in response to Zechariah's prayers for his barren wife. We learn that prayers long not answered are not prayers ignored or rejected. Prayers thought long dead, are heard and answered. Delays in answers must not diminish our faith.

What are the words the angel speaks?

Luke 1:16-17 He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17 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.

What news. God has broken 400 years of silence, God is sending another prophet, the last in the great line of OT prophets, who will come in the form of a son. God is visiting His people again. God is getting ready to fulfill His purposes promised in the OT.

The good news is a double blessing. Elizabeth, like Sarah, in her old age will bear a son; and her son will be the one to announce the coming of the Savior. This means the Savior will be coming in their son's lifetime, after two thousand years of waiting.

The future is predicted, and the prediction is proved in a miracle. Do you realize the importance of the angel's prediction? How can the angel even say such a thing?

God can say ahead of time what is going to happen, because God is the only one who knows the future and can control the future and guide the outcomes exactly as He said.

God doesn't come along after the fact and say, "Let me explain to you all what has happened here." No, He says before the fact what is going to happen and what it means.

This reminds me of Jesus telling His disciples beforehand about His death:

John 16:1-4 I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. 2 They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. 3 And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. 4 But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.

Isaiah 55:11 So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

God doesn't just predict what will happen in human terms, but in humanly impossible terms. Once God says what will happen, it is not like anyone can then go and make them happen. This is a humanly impossible birth. God is in control and nothing is impossible for Him.

Imagine after ten months, Zechariah's wife Elizabeth finally getting a chance to ask her husband questions. What happened back there in the temple, what did you see, what did he say, what was it like? Why did the angel make you mute for all these months?

How might Zechariah answer that question?

"It's personal. I would rather not say. It's something just between me and the angel. You ask too many questions, Elizabeth, you want too many details.

"Elizabeth, I am a sinful man, proud, and a fool. Here I am a priest, one who teaches others and serves the Lord in His holy Temple. I have taught the law, taught about Abraham and Sarah, about the births of Isaac, Samson, and Samuel. I have taught others to have faith, to believe in God and trust Him and wait for Him.

I thought I was a man of great faith. But when the angel told me what would happen, I doubted, I questioned him. I said:

"How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."
When God sent me an angel in answer to my prayer, I doubted. After all those years of waiting, my faith had faded.

God was gracious that the only thing he took from me were my words. He would have been completely justified to take my life.

Indeed, God is gracious, and our son shall be called John, which means God is gracious. Even when God rebukes us it is grace, and it turns to reward. Like the birth of John."

Why was Zechariah disciplined so harshly for his question? Didn't Abraham question the angel in the same way, "Shall a child be born to one as old as me?" Didn't Gideon ask for a sign, a double sign in fact? Didn't Mary question about how she would conceive without a man?

The fact that Zechariah was dealt with differently tells us God saw something in his heart that needed to be disciplined in this manner. God saw unbelief, he attributed to God inability or powerlessness. He was operating by sight rather than by faith.

Since his voice got him in trouble when he should have just listened, he loses his voice.

But notice the grace of God. The thing Zechariah failed to believe, was nevertheless granted to him. God's faithfulness is not cut off by our faithlessness. Unbelief doesn't keep God from keeping His promises and doing His will, but it does keep us from enjoying His promises.

We see the seriousness of unbelief by the seriousness of the discipline, to be deaf and dumb for ten months. This would be a daily reminder of His offense against God. To doubt God and deny His power is a serious thing.

Unbelief left the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness for 40 years.

Lack of faith and unbelief is a soul-ruining sin. It robs believers of their inward peace, weakens their hands in the day of battle, brings clouds over their hopes. It is the cause of a thousand spiritual diseases, and eats our hearts like a cancer. Make it a fixed principle in your heart to trust every word of God implicitly without wavering (see JC Ryle).

How many of us are wavering? Are we slow to believe? Are we slow to take God at His Word? Are we slow to obey because we want more information or to know how it will turn out?

How often are we proud or arrogant before God? Questioning what He is doing or how He is doing it? Questioning His timing, His plan? How many of us have questioned God in a faithless manner during this COVID crisis?

Luke 1:57-66, birth of John.

The birth of John shows us the hand of the Lord was on him from the beginning.

John's birth shares similarities to each of the births we have already considered and one we hadn't. When Isaac's wife Rebekah could not conceive, Isaac prayed for her, as Zechariah did for Elizabeth. John's birth to old parents was miraculous as was Isaac's birth to Abraham and Sarah, and John would bring joy as Isaac brought laughter. John was separated by a special vow, the vow of the Nazarite, for a special work, as was Samuel. John spent a long season in the wilderness before beginning his ministry as did Moses.

John the Baptist and Jesus.

As John's birth connected with what God had been doing, so it connects with what God is about to do.

Both men were prophesied by the prophet Malachi.

Both had miraculous births involving divine intervention.

Both births were announced by the angel Gabriel, who also announced their names.

Gabriel announces the mission of each and that they would both be great.

In both cases Zechariah and Mary were afraid when the Angel appeared to them.

In both, they questioned the possibility of the message.

Both were circumcised on the 8th day at the temple, and both had prophecies sung over them. Both men filled with the Spirit in extraordinary ways. Both had a long period of preparation before they each began their short ministry on earth. Both die at the hands of Roman rulers, Herod and Pontius Pilot.

John is the coming Elijah, the forerunner, messenger for the Messiah. Like the other babies his role is preparatory, transitional, moving us closer to the whole point of history.

Implications and application.

A sovereign God plans and purposes and rules and orders and ordains and controls Herod the king and the barren womb of Elizabeth and the casting of lots to fall to Zechariah and the sending of the archangel Gabriel and the miraculous birth of a baby and the name of that baby. The hand of the Lord is over it all. Nothing is impossible with God.

You can trust God, He is in control, He does impossible things, you can trust Him, put all your faith in Him.

God is sometimes slow, God is sometimes silent, but He is never absent, and He is never without His reasons. God has and God is revealing Himself from heaven to give us knowledge of salvation and forgiveness of our sins and unbelief. Jesus is the Christ, the one who has come and is coming again. Prepare your hearts and home for to receive Him.