

UNFOLDING OF THE STORY

SERIES: UNTO US

By Danny Hall

Christmas is one of my favorite times of year. Most people have rich memories of Christmas. Others have more difficult memories; sometimes Christmas is a hard season. But whatever our experience has been, Christmas always evokes all kinds of memories and thoughts, and they are not always about the Christmas story. We try to remember that this is about something more than just gifts and family and warm feelings. Sometimes we use little slogans like “Jesus is the reason for the season.” This slogan is exactly right, but I have to confess that when I see it I cringe a little inside. I worry that sometimes we just slap a little slogan like this on our festivities to somehow feel better about all the hoopla that’s going on.

This year during Advent I’m inviting us, myself included, to go back to the original stories and examine them afresh through the eyes of the gospel writer Luke, and to ask what is really going on here. What is God doing? Luke tells the story in more detail than any of the other gospel writers, giving us insights into what God is doing from his unique perspective as a non-Jew. He also connects these stories to the larger work of God, which is very important.

Most of our attention in the Christmas story goes to Mary and Joseph and Jesus, but in this message we’re going to look at a different family that Luke intertwines into his account:

Zechariah and Elizabeth and their son John. They are a wonderful example of God’s working out his great story in the lives of individuals. Luke 1:5-25:

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. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

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

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 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 give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 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. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 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.”

Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

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. 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.”

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 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.

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. “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.”

The promise of an extraordinary blessing

In this introduction, this wonderful older couple is described as “upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.” Wouldn’t most of us like to be described that way? These are special people. But at the same time they’re just ordinary people who love the Lord, serve him gladly, and keep his commandments.

Zechariah is serving as a priest, and Elizabeth is descended from the line of Aaron, who was the first priest in the nation of Israel. They both have priestly blood, if you will. Zechariah is not a high priest. They are just goodhearted people living out their service to the Lord.

There is only one problem for them, and that is that they have no children. Elizabeth says in verse 25, when she finally does conceive a child, that the disgrace is removed from her. Can you imagine how she would feel in a culture in which a childless woman is regarded as somehow being out of God’s favor? Her heart has been pure toward the Lord. She has served him faithfully. She loves him. She is not someone about whom we would say anything bad; in fact, people probably say only good about her. Yet this childlessness has cast a shadow over her, which God is graciously now removing late in her life.

At this time there were probably about eighteen thousand 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. Each team was scheduled to serve twice a year for one week in the temple in

Jerusalem. They had other duties during the rest of the year. And it's now Zechariah's turn to perform the priestly duties in the temple.

This must be some high season of worship or festival, although Luke doesn't mention it, because the burning of incense at the altar of incense was normally done only on high and holy days.

Zechariah is chosen by lot to be the one who will light the incense. Now, with eighteen thousand priests, probably each one gets to do this just once in his life. So this is probably a high point in Zechariah's life of service.

As he goes into the Holy Place to light the incense, an angel appears. Even though Zechariah is in this sacred place, the appearance of an angel nevertheless startles him, and he is afraid. Luke particularly emphasizes in his gospel that when an angel appears to someone, something big is about to happen, and the person to whom the angel appears is often afraid. I suppose if an angel appeared in my daily life, I'd probably be pretty scared too. As usual, the first words out of the mouth of the angel are, "Do not be afraid."

This angel has been sent by God to bring a message of God to Zechariah. He tells Zechariah that his prayer has been answered, and they will have a son. And this son will be special. He will be full of the Holy Spirit even in his mother's womb. He will live a consecrated life, and he will be a messenger of repentance, calling the nation back to righteousness, preparing the way of the Lord. This is John the Baptist, of course. Later in this series we're going to talk about his life.

One of the things I like about Zechariah is that he reminds me a lot of myself. He's a man who has tried to follow the Lord faithfully. At the highest point of his priestly service, an angel appears to him and says that the thing he has prayed for all his life is about to come through. And how does he react? He says, "Huh? How can that happen? Don't you know my wife and I are too old for this?"

Think about this. Zechariah is a priest. He would have been steeped in the history of Israel. He would have taught the familiar stories. Wouldn't you expect that he would remember Abraham, the most beloved figure in their history? His wife Sarah was barren, and he and Sarah were also too old when God promised them he was going to give them a son. That story has an integral place in Israel's history. God has marked out some of his greatest events through the miracle of birth through barren women, so that no one could question that this was his working. But at the moment of his greatest spiritual blessing, all Zechariah can think is, "Surely this can't happen to me!"

One of the beautiful things about the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is that God is using regular folks in his great story. Sometimes we canonize and lionize the people of faith in Scripture, and even people in our own lives who have influenced us by their spiritual maturity and depth, and somehow we think, "Those are the great saints through whom God can do great things. But me? That's another story."

At this point the angel pulls rank on Zechariah and says, "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. And now you will be

silent and not able to speak until this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.” Zechariah has doubted that the God of Israel, the sovereign God of the universe, has chosen him. He must come to trust God in this.

When Zechariah comes out of the temple he can’t talk. He’s gesturing, trying to communicate with them, and they realize that something miraculous has happened to him. After finishing out his priestly service that week, he goes home, and he and Elizabeth conceive this baby.

Luke says that Elizabeth stays in seclusion for five months. Some have speculated that she waits five months to go out into public because, since she’s an older woman, no one will believe she is pregnant until she has begun to show. Others think that perhaps she is so overwhelmed by the greatness of what God has done that she spends that time in communion with the Lord in order to be prepared for this great event.

John and Jesus

Now, Luke intertwines this story about John with the story about Jesus. We’re going to skip over the part about Jesus in verses 26-56 and look at it in the next message. The fulfillment of the angel’s promise comes to pass in verses 57-66:

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”

They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

The time of the birth arrives, and the baby is born. When it’s time to name the baby, great confusion breaks out. Everyone assumes he will be given a family name, as would be traditional. But Elizabeth says, “No! He is to be called John.” They think Elizabeth must have gotten it wrong, because, after all, Zechariah can’t talk. So they gesture to Zechariah, which suggests that

not only is he mute, but probably also deaf during this period, and he scribbles on a tablet, “His name is John.” At that moment his disciplinary muting is ended, and he breaks into a song of praise.

Now, John is born of an old woman and an old man, and his mother has also been barren. And God has acted decisively for his people in a miraculous birth before in Israel’s history. But Jesus’ birth goes one better, doesn’t it? He is born of a virgin. The miraculous birth of Jesus transcends all other miraculous births in Israel’s history. John is special, but Jesus is even more special. Their lives are intertwined, but one precedes the other and prepares for the other. Luke overlaps these stories in order for us to see the incredible way that God is working.

When a child is born, it is the custom of many people in our culture to send out birth announcements. Zechariah’s hymn of praise is a kind of birth announcement, but it’s a little more profound than the one Ginger and I sent out when our son was born. Verses 67-80:

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

**“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come and has redeemed his people.
He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
salvation from our enemies**

**and from the hand of all who hate us—
to show mercy to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.**

**And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”**

**And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert
until he appeared publicly to Israel.**

This hymn of praise has two parts. In the first part Zechariah talks about the fulfillment of God's promises, and in the second part he talks specifically about the missions of John the Baptist and

of the One for whom John will prepare the way. Let's look briefly at this beautiful song of praise.

Promises fulfilled

In the first part, verses 68-75, Zechariah tells us with overflowing praise that what is happening to him and Elizabeth with the birth of their son John is the beginning of the fulfillment of all that the nation of Israel has looked forward to.

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come and has redeemed his people.”

Zechariah understands with the insight of the Holy Spirit that God is beginning to unfold the final act of bringing redemption to his people. Messiah is on his way!

This whole first part reminds us of the things God has promised. “A horn of salvation” is a picture of victory and power in battle. “In the house of his servant David” speaks of the fulfillment of the prophecy that a descendant of David would sit on his throne forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16). “Salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” points to the moment of deliverance. “To show mercy to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham,”—these promises are being fulfilled right now, beginning with the birth of John, who precedes the coming of Messiah.

But in verses 74-75 Zechariah turns us to a very important part of the recitation of what God is accomplishing: he's going to fulfill his covenants, keep his promises, rescue us, and redeem us, all in order to "enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." So many times in the wonderful story of what God is doing in salvation, our focus is on the forgiveness of our sins, the deliverance that we have from eternal punishment, and being brought into eternal life with Christ. And those truths unquestionably far surpass anything we can imagine, so it's no wonder that we focus there. But those are not all of the truth. The whole truth is that God saves us in order that we might serve. He calls us to bring honor and glory to his Name, to participate in what he's doing, without fear.

This is a beautiful picture. If indeed God is the sovereign of the whole universe and he is decisively working out his purposes, fulfilling his covenants, and keeping his promises, then he will fulfill all the promises that still remain unfulfilled. Will there finally be justice on earth? Yes! Will all that God has promised come to fruition? Absolutely! He is the faithful God, and he is demonstrating it here in the lives of John and Jesus; and he will do that until all things are finally made right. And because we know that the sovereign God of the universe is faithful, we can serve him without fear. There is nothing this world can throw at us that can thwart God's rescuing and redeeming work.

We're called to serve him "in holiness and righteousness." God is not just populating heaven, he is calling out a people for his glory, who stand together in this world as a testimony to the glory of living in relationship with God and being free from selfish motives, who collectively

demonstrate ethical beauty and a better way to live, a way that glorifies God. That is satisfying at the deepest level of our being. What a calling!

In the latter part of this hymn, Zechariah personalizes these truths. He sees the glorious fulfillment of this grand story of which he has been a priest all his adult life, unfolding before his eyes in this little baby.

The one who goes before the Lord

“And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High....”

The title “prophet of the Most High” was reserved for the very highest office of the land. It was often applied directly to the Messiah, but here it’s quickly qualified:

“For you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him....”

This special little child is not just an answer to the prayer of a barren woman and her husband, but is part of the fulfillment of God’s plan, the one who will prepare the way for the Messiah to come.

“To give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,

because of the tender mercy of our God....”

This is John’s special calling in life.

We’re going to look at John’s life more specifically in a later message, but he is described a little in verse 80. He lives in the wild until he appears publicly. John does not grow up to be your average guy. But he is full of the Holy Spirit and will fulfill his role of calling the nation back, challenging all the wrong assumptions of its leadership, asking them to understand more fully the covenants that God made with them.

Zechariah closes his song with these prophecies of the One for whom his son John will prepare the way.

“By which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

This is a picture of Christ, the Messiah. The word “rising,” used of the sun, was often used to translate the Hebrew word that meant to shoot up. In the minds of those in the Jewish leadership who were particularly steeped in the Old Testament, like Zechariah, it probably brought to mind that prophecy in Isaiah of the shoot from the stump of Jesse that will come up like a tender plant (Isaiah 11:1; 53:2). That idea of rising up always depicts God’s acting decisively. Zechariah

rightly sees here that through the lineage of David God is now fulfilling all the promises of Messiah. The One who will rise up and bring light into the darkness and show the way is about to come on the scene. And Zechariah's praise for him just gushes forth. This is the beautiful part of the story that Zechariah gets to participate in.

One of the reasons this story is very near and dear to my heart is that Zechariah was probably a lot like us pastors here at PBC. He was a village priest, and although he got to do special things every now and then, his real service was just faithfully ministering day by day as a priest to the people of God. I feel very privileged that God has allowed me to have this ministry, and I think all of the pastors here would say that. But this story is also particularly dear to my heart because Zechariah and Elizabeth had a hard time having children, and Ginger and I went through that, too. In the midst of all kinds of trouble with pregnancies, God gave us one special son. We wanted lots of children, and God didn't choose to do that, but blessed us with this one. So Zechariah and Elizabeth are just like us. God has used them in this incredible way, allowed them to be a part of something magnificent, and that's what God offers to all of us. Zechariah is not some great hero of the faith, he's just a normal human being trying to be faithful to the Lord, but he's open to what God will do.

There are three things that I think we can learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Being part of the plan of a faithful God

First, our lives are not accidents, but part of the larger plan of God. There is so much in our lives that we don't understand. But in the midst of our normal, everyday, up-and-down, inexplicable pain, sometimes God reaches down and says, "You're part of something bigger than all this. You're part of the grand story I am writing of love and redemption and forgiveness and transformation and rescue of lives all around you." In spite of all of their pain, Zechariah and Elizabeth continued to be faithful day after day. God swept them up into the beauty of this story that he was writing, and he does that with you and me, too. He lets us write chapters of his story in ways we could never imagine, if we will simply step back and in faith see our lives in the larger context of what he's doing, reaching the world with his love.

The second lesson we can learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth is that the more we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures, learning of the character of God and the story of his saving work, the more ready we will be to receive what God has for us with joy and praise. Even though Zechariah faltered and doubted for a moment, the truth was that as God unfolded his plan, he recognized it for what it was. He knew God's Scriptures, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, he began to see what God was doing. The reason we encourage everyone, including ourselves, to live in the Scriptures and to learn them, as I've said many times, is not so we can all win Bible trivia games, but so that we can connect with God, learn his heart and his character, and see what he's doing; so that when he brings us into one of those places where he will allow us to be a part of what he's doing, we recognize it. If we walk with God, then we see the Spirit of God working in and through us, and we're connected to the work of God in ways that we could not be otherwise. Zechariah's and Elizabeth's faithfulness to live in the Scriptures and in communion

with God permitted them to recognize the moment when it came. “This is God at work! And we get to be a part of it!”

Finally, in this story of Zechariah and Elizabeth we are reminded that God is faithful to his promises and faithful to us. Even in the merciful act of disciplining Zechariah because of his moment of doubt, we see God’s faithfulness to lead Zechariah to a deeper understanding of who he is.

These two normal, everyday folks remind us of what a great adventure it is to walk with God. I hope as we enter into this story, we will be transformed not only by the beauty of God’s work of redemption and forgiveness, but also by the beauty of our being invited to be a part of it.

Scripture is taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION ® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Catalog No. 5221

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

Second Message

Danny Hall

December 10, 2006

[Back to Index page](#)

Copyright © 2007 [Discovery Publishing](#) the publications ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#).

This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church.

It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale without the prior written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made, in writing, and addressed to:
Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA 94306-3695.