**A GODLY COUPLE’S LONG-TERM PRAYER**

Luke 1:1-25, Key Verse: 1:13

“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.’”

Merry Christmas! Our Christmas message series started last week, when M. Gideon showed us Isaiah’s prophecy of a child who would be born to be our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. It was a Christmas message because of course, this prophecy is about Jesus our Lord and Savior. His coming into the world is what we celebrate at Christmastime.

Today we turn to the new Testament to think about the circumstances surrounding Jesus’ actual birth. The Christmas stories in the gospels are important because they are about the dawning of God’s salvation, but they are also important because they show what kind of people God uses in his salvation work. Of course, there is Mary and Joseph, the famous young engaged couple who became Jesus’ earthly parents. But there is also another couple very important to the Christmas story, an older couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. They may have thought they were too old for God to do something new with their lives, but little did they know that after a lifetime of faithfulness and prayer, God would choose them to become the parents of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. Today, as we study the announcement of John the Baptist’s conception, let’s pray to rekindle our faith in the power of a life of faithfulness and prayer.

1. Zechariah and Elizabeth’s faithful life (1-7)

Among the four gospels, the gospel of Luke gives the most detail about the circumstances of Jesus’ birth. The first four verses of today’s passage are the preamble, in which Luke, the author, gives his justification for writing this gospel. In verse 1, Luke admits that he is not the first one who set out to write an account of Jesus’ life to show how Jesus’ life, death and resurrection fulfilled God’s prophecies to Israel and brought salvation to the whole world. Luke attributes great importance to the eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ life that had been handed down from the apostles. Luke himself was not one of those eyewitnesses—in fact, Luke was a Gentile Christian who became a co-worker of Paul on his missionary journeys. But Luke became convicted that he should undertake his own thorough investigation of all the events and then write an orderly account. He really wanted to be properly qualified to share the gospel with others. People say Luke may have even interviewed Mary, Jesus’ mother, because of the amount of detail he knows about Mary’s experiences.

In verses 3 and 4 Luke says he did all this work so that the original recipient of this gospel, whose name, Theophilus, means “lover of God”, may know the certainty of the things he has been taught. God blessed Luke’s truth-seeking attitude and his account became one of the four canonical gospels. It makes me think of how many missionaries and shepherds in our church have studied the Bible and Bible history for themselves so diligently, so they also can better assure their Bible students of the certainty of what they believe.

Luke is the only gospel that records the birth of John the Baptist as well as Jesus’ birth. He begins with John’s father, Zechariah. To date the events he was describing, Luke says in verse 5 that this was the time of Herod king of Judea. “Judea” was the Roman name for the territory around Jerusalem that was the center of the Jewish nation. Israel was not an independent nation at this time but was under the Roman Empire, and Herod was what they call a “client king” under Roman jurisdiction. This Herod was the same Herod described in Matthew’s gospel, who massacred all the baby boys around Bethlehem in order to kill the newborn Jesus, to prevent him from fulfilling the prophecies. Between the Roman occupation and Herod’s tyranny, it was not a hopeful time for God’s people. But it’s often the case that God chooses the darkest times to reveal his light most brightly. To do so, God can use people who keep even a small lamp of God burning in their lives.

Who was Zechariah? He was a Jewish priest. From our Exodus study we learned that priests in Israel were the male descendants of Aaron, Moses’ brother. They were the only ones who could wear the priestly garments and carry out sacrifices and services in the temple. Their role was that of mediators who came before God on behalf of all the Jewish people, to petition God to forgive their sins and bless their nation. Spiritually speaking, a priest’s function is prayer for their people. As we know, Apostle Peter told us that in Jesus, all believers are a royal priesthood. We carry out our priestly function by praying for the world.

In Zechariah’s time, for the vast majority of the priests, being a priest was not a full-time job. By that time, there were a lot of descendants of Aaron. Verse 5 says that Zechariah was of the division of Abijah. At this time, there were twenty-four such divisions, each of which served for two weeks out of the year. When it was one division’s turn to serve, the priests in that division would go to Jerusalem and stay there for those weeks, if they didn’t already live there.

What else does it say about Zechariah and Elizabeth? Look at verse 6. “Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly.” They observed all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. What does it mean? It means they took God’s commands seriously and did all they could to live according to them. This includes the moral commands, such as the Ten Commandments, as well as the Bible’s regulations in regard to Jewish life—regulations about what you could eat, and when you could and couldn’t work. There were also additional regulations just for priests.

To be faithful in anything over a long period of time—over a lifetime—to the point of being called blameless is not easy. There are not many people who achieve that. It’s even harder in dark or difficult times. In difficult times, many people make excuses to focus only on their their own survival. I’m sure that in the times of the Romans and Herod, many Jewish people gave up on keeping the Law’s regulations, because there seemed to be no profit from paying close attention to them. But Zechariah and Elizabeth stayed faithful. Luke says they were righteous in God’s sight. We know from the gospel that observing the letter of the law doesn’t make a person righteous before God. But Zechariah and Elizabeth’s actions are the evidence of their faith. They demonstrate a heart that loves God genuinely.

Their faithfulness is all the more impressive when we think about their life situation. Verse 7 says, “But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.” Like Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament, Zechariah and Elizabeth had a major life problem of childlessness. At those times, having no children was considered more serious than it is today. Children were considered the primary sign of God’s blessing. They represent hope for the future. Imagine how painful it was for Zechariah and Elizabeth to see themselves growing older and older and finally pass the time of childbearing, with no children to give them joy.

This teaches us something very important: even if we live rightly before God, even blamelessly, we can still have very serious and long-term problems. We all like to hear testimonies about people whose life issues were all solved in a flash when they came to Jesus. But that’s not necessarily how it works. The benefit of faithfulness sometimes takes a long time to see. Earthly blessing is not even the true goal of faith. It’s more about whether we can grow to love God for who he is rather than for what he can do for us. Zechariah and Elizabeth could have made a very good excuse for giving up on keeping the Law, because it seemed like God did not bless them for their faithfulness. But, to make a very long, a life-long story, short, they didn’t give up. The benefit of faithfulness sometimes takes a long time to see, but finally, Zechariah and Elizabeth saw it.

1. Zechariah receives good news (8-17)

Verses 8 and 9 give us the setup for God’s intervention in Zechariah and Elizabeth’s lives. “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.” This is actually remarkable in itself, because not only did each division of priests serve for just two weeks a year, but within each division there were many more priests than were actually needed to perform the temple rituals, so that they chose by lot (at random) who could do it. Being chosen to actually go into the temple and burn incense might be a once-in-a-lifetime thing for a priest, if that.

We know this was no coincidence. God had chosen Zechariah and Elizabeth for a great blessing, and to give Zechariah the news, he wanted to bring him into his own presence, into the Holy Place. Also notice that in verse 10 it says “when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.” It seems to be saying that the prayers of all God’s people played an important role in this intervention of God. The burning of incense itself represents prayer going up to God.

Then, while Zechariah was inside, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. Zechariah was startled and gripped with fear, as humans naturally are when they encounter a heavenly being. If you read all the stories of angelic visitations in the Bible, the angel’s first words to people typically have to be, “Don’t be afraid.” I guess angels get training in fear management before they are sent down.

The angel said, “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.” The angel said, “Your prayer has been heard.” The angel’s words also verify to us that Zechariah did indeed pray, not just ritualistically but earnestly, in such a way that God would hear. After a whole life of praying, seemingly with no result, Zechariah finally gets a direct verification that, yes, the message got through. Of course, most people live their whole life without hearing these words directly from an angel. But the point is that we can believe that God hears our prayers, no matter how long it takes him to answer them.

Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a baby, and his name would be John. The Hebrew name that we translate to “John”, “*Yochanan*”, means “The Lord (Yahweh) is gracious.” Indeed, God was gracious to Zechariah and Elizabeth. The angel said this baby would be a joy and delight to them. No doubt! Think about the joy of receiving a child long after it seemed impossible. God’s will was to give his faithful servants joy.

In fact, the blessing God wanted to give was even greater than just the blessing of having a child. John would not only bring joy to Zechariah and Elizabeth, but to many people. In verses 14b-15 the angel continues, “… 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 before he is born.” John would be someone very important in God’s salvation history, and his parents needed to cooperate with God’s work by helping their son live a pure, set-apart life.

Everybody wants their child or children to be great. John the Baptist would be great, not because he would be the greatest soccer player or win a Nobel Prize or start a billion-dollar company, but...why? The angel says in verses 16 and 17. “He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17And 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.”

We know that John the Baptist himself did not marry or have children and that he died as a martyr. But bringing people back to God, as John did through his ministry of repentance, is the greatest life. We know that people are living in the dark without any wisdom from God about life. People always need to be turned back to God. John’s ministry would bring about a national revival in Israel; Zechariah and Elizabeth could be truly proud of that. But most of all, when the angel said, John would turn “the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous,” he meant that John would point people to Jesus, to prepare the way for the Lord. The best reward God gives his servants for a life of prayer is to make them a part of his salvation work.

1. Zechariah and Elizabeth’s quiet thankfulness (18-25)

The angel’s news for Zechariah was almost too great to be believed. In fact, Zechariah had some real trouble believing it. How did Zechariah respond to the angel? In verse 18 he says, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” Here we see the limit of Zechariah’s faith. His skepticism spills out of him and he seems to be asking the angel for some kind of proof, saying “How can I be sure of this?” Why couldn’t he believe? He had just seen an angel, after all. But the reality of Zechariah’s and his wife’s age and their childlessness had hung over him for so long that he just couldn’t comprehend how this situation could change.

The angel rebuked Zechariah’s unbelief. He said, “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. 20And 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.” Zechariah really should have understood the trustworthiness of the angel Gabriel who was sent from the very presence of God, and give such a being’s words the faith they deserved. Because Zechariah had spoken unbelieving words, he was made unable to speak until the time the baby would be born.

What do you think about this? I thought that if I were in Zechariah’s place, standing in front of an angel, I would keep my doubts to myself. It is a stereotype that when people get older, they tend to put less of a rein on their mouths, and start to say whatever is on their minds. I don’t know if that’s true, but I had better watch myself to not become like that, or I will get in worse trouble than Zechariah! The real problem, however, was not Zechariah’s mouthiness but the unbelief in his heart. This time of being unable to speak is not such a harsh punishment—especially not for those times, when people didn’t have as many Zoom meetings as now. At least God didn’t cancel his promise to give them a child as a result of Zechariah’s unbelief! I believe Zechariah could use his silent time to reflect deeply on God’s grace and grow humble and thankful.

Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth, is a better example. Verse 24 says, “After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.” Why did she remain in seclusion? I guess she was very careful to take care of her health, being pregnant for the first time at a late age. But also, this was her way of expressing her thanks to God alone. We can see this from what she says in verse 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.” Elizabeth was deeply impressed by God’s grace, because through her whole life being childless had been a source of painful disgrace in her heart.

Do you have any disgrace in your heart that has followed you around for a long time? Now God had suddenly taken away that disgrace from Elizabeth—turned *dis*grace into abundant grace. She understood that this was not done for her so she could show off, but so she could give thanks to God in her heart first of all. Therefore, a quiet time of reflection seemed most appropriate. Plus, God gave her an extra blessing of not having to listen to her husband’s complaining for nine months! The Christmas season has always seemed to me like a very appropriate time for quiet reflection on God’s grace, if we can still our hearts in the midst of all the busyness.

Zechariah and Elizabeth, an ordinary but godly couple, could not have imagined that their humble lives of prayer would lead to them playing such an important role in God’s salvation history. We may be tempted think that God mainly rewards big, visible acts of faith to try to do something great. But faith that perseveres quietly over a long period of time, with prayer, is also used greatly by God. Let’s remember what the angel Gabriel confirmed: “Your prayer has been heard.” In some ways, Zechariah and Elizabeth are models of their whole nation, the Jews, who had waited so long for God’s promise of the Messiah. God used his people’s prayer to bring about what he promised in the right time. We also should not give up our hope and prayer topic in God’s salvation work even when times are dark. Let’s have faith that God takes away our disgrace in his time to reveal his glory. And let’s remember to thank God with our hearts and mouths for what he has done for us.