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Pataskala Nazarene Church
Advent December 3, 2007

Zechariah – From Disappointment to Joy

Luke 1:5-25

The season of Advent is a special time of the year.

It is the time when we travel back to the happenings in Bethlehem when baby Jesus, our Messiah was born.

It is during this time that we try to experience the wonder once again as **we remind ourselves who it was that came to earth to be born of a virgin, and why.**

But it's really amazing to me that there are so many who are totally against the mention of Jesus Christ in Christmas or have you noticed that people say, "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas?"

John Gibson, a popular anchor for the Fox News Channel, has been digging up evidence about activists, lawyers, politicians, educators, and media people who are leading the war against Christmas.

And he reveals that the situation isn't just hype. For instance:

- In Illinois, state government workers were forbidden from saying the words "Merry Christmas" while at work

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- In Rhode Island, local officials banned Christians from participating in a public project to decorate the lawn of City Hall

- A New Jersey school banned even instrumental versions of traditional Christmas carols

- Arizona school officials ruled it unconstitutional for a student to make any reference to the religious history of Christmas in a class project

Millions of Americans are starting to fight back against the secularist forces and against local officials who would rather surrender than be seen as politically incorrect.

Gibson shows readers how they can help save Christmas from being twisted beyond recognition, with even the slightest reference to Jesus completely disappearing.

I would like to challenge all the believers here today that whenever anyone says to you, "Happy Holidays," just look at them in a positive way and say "Merry Christmas!"

Now, I don't look to retailers or the general culture to validate the meaning of the season for me, you and I don't have to do that.

But what does concern me is the attempt to rewrite history to rob Jesus of the enormously positive

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influence He has had on the world over the past two thousand years.

And to be honest with you, I for one and I hope that I'm joined by many of you who will finally stand up and join the great majority of our nation who are not allowing a few to rob us of the real meaning of Christmas.

Now with that said, Today we begin our first Sunday of Advent.

During our Advent season this year we are going to **examine the Christmas story as it is recorded in the Gospel of Luke.**

Luke begins his account with the story of **the birth of John the Baptist** who it appears was actually a cousin of Jesus.

John's parents were **Zechariah and Elizabeth.**

It is to their story that I want to direct your attention to this morning.

I want you to see first of all:

I. THE DISCOURAGEMENT OF ZECHARIAH **Now the question is who is Zechariah?**

Our text tells us several things about Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth.

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First, we are told Zechariah was a priest.

In Zechariah's time there were better than 20,000 priests in Israel. Think about that! Based upon the size of Israel – that is pretty remarkable.

Now let me explain why there were so many priests:

Anyone who was a male child as a direct descendent of Aaron was a priest by birth. It wasn't a special calling – it happened through their birth.

Because there were so many priests, in the time of David, the group of priests was **divided into 24 divisions.**

Zechariah belonged to the priestly division named after Abijah.

Twice a year each division would serve at the temple for a one week period.

If they divided these equally that would have meant 833 priests for a one week period.

And I believe that it was a Divine event for Zechariah to be the priest who did the prayers for the nation on that particular week.

Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, was also born to a priestly family.

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It was not required a priest marry someone also from a priestly family but it was considered a special blessing when such a marriage took place.

Luke describes Zechariah and Elizabeth as people who were upright and worked hard to be obedient to the Lord.

They were not only upright in their own behavior; they were also upright in the sight of God.

This does not mean they were perfect, but it does mean they were sincere and honest in their commitment to the Lord.

Their faith was real.

The one disappointment in the life of Zechariah and Elizabeth was the fact that they didn't have any children.

It's hard for us to understand what being childless meant in those days.

Children were considered your heritage **“from the Lord”**.

The fact that Zechariah and Elizabeth were “well along in years” means they had pretty well accepted the fact that they weren't going to have any children.

Now - **Please don't miss the emotional significance of these words.**

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Zechariah and Elizabeth were good people. They served the Lord by vocation and in the way they lived their lives.

Yet, for some reason they had been denied the blessing of having a child.

In today's medical world, doctor's can pretty well tell a couple why they can't have children.

But - I imagine at first they were confused and somewhat disappointed.

Their experience is not unique.

There are many who feel this way today.

There are those today who can't have children and they wonder why others have been blessed while they have not been.

I remember when Jeff and Susan were trying to have children and had opted for adoption when all of a sudden they were blessed by Susan being pregnant not with one child, but with twins.

And as a result of their trust in God, Jeff and Susan have Lathan and Landom.

But there are couples who hear of those who are pregnant and unhappy about the fact of being pregnant, and they can't help but wonder why God

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would allow someone who didn't want a baby to have one, and yet ignore the desires they have.

Think about the single person who longs to be cherished by another.

This person longs for someone to treasure them, put their arms around them and love them.

They think and understand people enjoy their company but no one seems to truly love them.

They attend weddings, and participate in weddings, but they have no wedding of their own.

Then there is the divorced person who has spent their life dreaming of that perfect family.

They worked hard, endured much and still their marriage ended in divorce.

They feel like "damaged goods" and wonder what they did wrong.

There are others who have big dreams that never are fulfilled, those who struggle financially, those who work hard and are taken for granted.

All of these people seem to be surrounded by those who have what they have been longing for.

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They face a similar discouragement to that of Zechariah and Elizabeth. It may be hidden, but it is very painful.

II. Secondly, I want you to see: **THE SURPRISE IN THE TEMPLE**

One day Zechariah was at the temple during one of his weeks of service and everything changed.

Each day the temple duties of the priests were assigned by lot.

There were many duties out and around the temple but very few priests ever served in the temple building itself.

The most holy job a priest (other than the High Priest) could have was to offer incense at the altar of incense in the holy place of the temple.

Since there were around 1000 priests serving every week, few were ever chosen to offer the incense.

Because so few priests were given this honor, a priest was only allowed to offer the incense in the temple once in a lifetime.

After that he was always known as one who was 'rich and holy'.

On this particular day, Zechariah was chosen to offer the incense.

It was an incredible privilege.

The act was filled with pageantry.

It is described well by William Hendrickson,

Zechariah proceeds toward the golden altar. He is accompanied by two assistants. One of these men is carrying in a golden bowl burning coals from the altar of burnt-offering, and is spreading them out on the altar of incense. He then withdraws. The other assistant is carrying a golden censer filled with incense. He arranges the incense upon the altar. He too withdraws.

And now profound silence ensues, for the most solemn action of the ritual is about to occur. A signal is given. The sacred moment has arrived for Zechariah to place the incense upon the coals, causing a cloud to arise, its fragrance rising and spreading. Together with the ascending aroma a fervent prayer, consisting of thanksgiving for blessings received and of supplication for peace upon Israel, now issues from the heart and lips of the priest. The people, gathered “outside” the sanctuary but “inside” its courts are also praying, in a prostrate position and with outstretched hands. Then they wait for Zechariah to return from the altar of incense and to proceed eastward to the steps in the front of the sanctuary. On these steps Zechariah, accompanied by other priests, is expected to pronounce the Aaronic blessing on the people.

This benediction will be followed by songs of praise, public offerings, etc.[1]

During Zechariah’s offering things did not go as they normally went.

As Zechariah offered the offering of incense an angel appeared to him.

This angel, later identified as Gabriel, stood to Zechariah’s left, on the right side of the altar.

Zechariah was understandably startled and afraid. It says in verse 11-12, ***“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.”

Read on with me in verse 13, Gabriel said, ***“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard, your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you are to name him John.”***

The question we want to ask is this:

“Which prayer?”

It is unlikely that Zechariah was praying for a child as he offered the sacrifice, he recognized his age.

Surely, he had given up on that prayer.

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So, was the angel referring to the prayer just offered for the blessing of Israel?

In that case the angel was saying, ***“God will indeed bless Israel and He is going to start by using your son!”***

It is also possible that Gabriel was saying, ***“Zechariah, God has heard all the prayers you have prayed over the years for your wife to conceive. That prayer is now going to be answered.”***

The angel told Zechariah that he would not only have a child, but a son.

Not only would he have a son, but he would have a son who was **devoted to the Lord,**
filled with the Spirit, and
destined to be the forerunner of the long-awaited Messiah.

Now folks, we have to realize how very significant this is to the Jews who for all these years had read about the coming of their Messiah – AND THEY WERE LOOKING FOR HIM – EXPECTING HIM TO COME!

He would live in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Zechariah’s son would fulfill the long-anticipated prophecy of Malachi at the end of the Old Testament.

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Let’s read verse 17. ***“And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and the power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”***

Put yourself in Zechariah’s place.

He was stunned.

His mind was on “overload”.

This news was so grand that it seemed too good to be true.

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

Later in verse 34, **Mary asks what seems to be a similar question of Gabriel.**

She asks, ***“How will this be, since I am a virgin?”***

Based on the response of Gabriel we must conclude that **Mary was seeking understanding,**

Zechariah was expressing doubt.

As a consequence of his doubting the angel Gabriel, He was **Zechariah was to be unable to speak until the baby was born.**

Have you even wondered why God did this to Zachariah?

I believe Zachariah, though a righteous man, still needed to learn to trust God more.

And His inability to speak for this amount of time, I remind you, a supernatural sign, undoubtedly increased his faith.

This caused him to believe that God's promise for a man child would come to pass.

Think about what this meant,

- **He could not pronounce the blessing**
- **He could not share the great news about his new baby**
- **When he returned home and Elizabeth said, "How was your time at the temple, dear?" He couldn't tell her.**

Can you imagine with me Elizabeth's response?

- When people came up to the gray-haired couple on the street after Elizabeth was showing that she was pregnant and said stupid things (as they always do) like, **"How did this happen?"**

I mean don't you agree with me – It's a husband – it's a wife.

That's how it happened!

But – listen - Zechariah couldn't tell them. He couldn't talk about it. He couldn't tell them about the angel.

When his son was first placed into his arms, he couldn't talk to him.

During the entire pregnancy Zechariah was left to ponder his foolishness in not believing the angel of God.

He would be left to listen to others and ***to the still small voice of the Lord.***

He had all this time to think about the wonderful blessing and responsibility God had given him.

Elizabeth delivered their child and eight days later when it came time to have him named and circumcised, **Zechariah was asked what the name of the child should be.**

He wrote, "His name is John".

Zechariah was obedient to the Lord.

At this point his mouth was opened and we are told that he began "*praising God*".

Wouldn't you have done that too?

The nine months of silence transformed this man from one who doubted to one who worshipped.

PRACTICAL LESSONS:

This is a great story but it's important that we see beyond the facts and ask that all important question, **“Is there something that God wants me to learn here?”**

I see six things for us to learn.

1. First, notice from this account the significance of Jesus.

I know there is no mention of Jesus but this story tells us something important about Him.

The whole purpose of John's life was to ***“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.”*** (1:17)

This account reminds us that **Jesus is the One who is the long-awaited Messiah.**

John's role was to point others to Him.

Jesus was the reason for the barrenness Elizabeth.

John's birth was timed to coincide with the birth of Jesus.

God was working in the timing of history to bring all things to this moment in time.

Jesus was no ordinary man – He's the Messiah!!!

He was not **“one of the prophets”** as some would call Him - He was the unique God-Man who came to give His life for those who would receive Him and accept Him as their Personal Savior.

We must never forget that Christmas is not about the birth of a baby; babies are born all the time.

Christmas is not about showing love to others through the giving of gifts.

Christmas is about the birth of the One ordained by God to be our Savior. He is Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God.

John's birth should lead us to worship and bow down before the Savior.

2. Second, this account reminds us that the trials and difficulties of life are purposeful.

Zechariah and Elizabeth thought God had forgotten them or turned away from them.

That's what it felt like, but that's not what was really happening.

The truth is, **God was preparing them.**

His delay was purposeful.

Don't you wonder why God picked Zechariah and Elizabeth at this time in their lives?

It's possible that God did it for **several reasons**.

He wanted everyone to know that this was going to be no ordinary child.

This was a child that was commissioned by God.

Thirdly, God knew that there would not be a day that would go by in John's young life when he wasn't told about God's greatness and God's calling for his life.

Fourth, there would certainly be no one who would love a child more than Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Folks, let's learn this lesson: **God has a purpose for the delays in our life.**

When times are discouraging it is easy to think that God has forgotten you.

It is tempting to look at others who seem to have everything going their way and feel that there must be something wrong with you.

You might even question – Why did this happen to me?

Friend, God has not abandoned you.

He is using the trials of your life to deepen your faith and prepare you for some special blessing.

Don't ever forget that!!!

He may be using this hard time to teach you valuable truth or skills that will help you in a future endeavor.

He may be giving you a platform for ministry that you could not have had without first walking through the furnace of difficulty.

The best people to turn to in times of grief are those who have grieved.

The most compassionate people in the world are those who know what it is like to hurt.

The best friends are those who know what it is like to be rejected.

It's possible that God is using the difficult time in your life to awaken you to your need for His grace.

I remember a phone conversation once when a friend of mine was complaining.

This person said, "Why didn't God just let me die?"

My response was, "Could it be that God loves you too much to relieve you of the suffering yet?"

Could it be that God knows you really aren't ready to face eternity?

Is it possible God is waiting for you to turn to Him?"

My friend took those words to heart and before he died he turned to Christ.

God gave him many months to grow in His grace before he died.

That delay may be the difference between Heaven and Hell for my friend.

It could be the same reason God delays in your life.

Of course, it's possible that we may not understand God's purpose until we get to Heaven.

This one thing is sure: **God does not abandon His children.**

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth gives us one final lesson:

Fifth – I want you to see - The best way to handle discouraging times is to live faithfully and trust fully.

Zechariah and Elizabeth continued to live righteously and faithfully before the Lord.

They continued to serve God and obey Him in spite of their discouragement and confusion.

Their circumstances were difficult but their trust remained true.

They determined that they would trust the character of God rather than the circumstances of life.

It's a good principle for us.

My Sixth Point is - What was Zechariah's one mistake?

He failed to trust God.

Zechariah was guilty of looking at circumstances rather than trusting the promise of God that was delivered by Gabriel.

You may never have an angel appear to you, but God has given us His promise in the Scriptures.

In Proverbs, Solomon says, ***"Trust in the Lord with you're your heart, lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge Him an He will direct your path."***

God may not lead you in the path you would always want to travel.

His plan for your life may be different than your plan.

Zechariah and Elizabeth discovered that God's plan was different than their plan for their life.

In hindsight, they would say that God's plan was much better and well worth waiting for.

If you trust Him you will say the same thing.

What is going on in your life this Advent season?

Are you churning?

Are you feeling alone, abandoned, and forgotten?

If so, I encourage you to hang on.

Renew your hope.

Re-read the story of this elderly couple and draw courage and comfort from their story.

God's delays are filled with purpose.

You just need to Trust Him.

Maybe things are going well for you.

In fact, maybe things are going so well that you find yourself looking with pity on those who seem to be less blessed.

Perhaps, if you are honest, you feel a little smug and superior.

You have come to believe that you have been blessed because you are more spiritual than those around you.

If that's the case, remember all those people who talked about Zechariah and Elizabeth **behind their backs**. Do you know what that's like?

Think about all those people who thought Zechariah and Elizabeth didn't have a child because they had done something wrong.

In truth, it was Zechariah and Elizabeth who were the ones chosen by God.

It's just as possible that the people we feel superior to are actually servants of God about to be greatly used.

So, keep your eyes open.

Show the love of Christ to everyone you see.

Smile at the people in the check-out line.

Be gracious to those who are in your way.

Be patient with those who drive slower than you'd like for them to.

Befriend those who are lonely.

Be sensitive to those who are hurting.

God has called us to act with compassion and love.

And besides, you never know when you may be meeting a person that God will use greatly.

In fact, it could even be you.

Closing of the service:

This morning is our first Sunday of Advent.
Is there something that God spoke to you about in this sermon this morning?
Do you want to spend some time in prayer at the altar?
If so I would like to invite you to come forward and let me pray with you.
If you need to make a spiritual decision for Jesus Christ and allow Him to become your Savior and Messiah, I can't think of a better time than the First Sunday of Advent.
We come today expecting Him to meet our needs.
That's what Advent is all about – Expecting Jesus to meet our needs.

And when you obey and trust God in all things – you will turn your life from disappointment to Joy just like Zachariah.

And isn't that what you want anyway?