

#51
Christmas According to Angels
“Hear”

Luke 1:11-20

An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear.

¹³ The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the Lord’s eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. ¹⁶ He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old.”

¹⁹ The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in God’s presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. ²⁰ Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn’t believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen.”

400 years !!! 400 years of silence, of longing, of waiting, of trying to hope. The people of Israel would have identified with Paul Simon’s haunting song, “The Sound of Silence”:

“Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share”

Tevye, the father expresses it so well in the movie, “Fiddler on the Roof”. He tries so hard to be faithful but everything is going wrong. Where are you God?

We are starting the season of waiting called Advent. How do we learn to stop and wait when the whole world shouts, “Hurry up, get it all now, do it now? Why wait? Let’s get all the gifts, all the lights and all the joy now.”

Galatians 4:4-5 tells us that when the fullness of time had come God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order that He might redeem us and adopt us. How does the fullness of time come without waiting for it?

You, no doubt, have noticed that the Christmas tree is not in the center this year. The rationale is to help us keep our focus on Jesus and not the peripheral.

Christmas trees are good, lights are good, gifts are good. We cannot let the Christmas tree hide the symbol that reminds us that Jesus is the reason for the season. Everything we say and do is about Jesus birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension. How is my life, as Christian, as follower of Christ is different from the rest of the world? How can I give glory to God during the Advent? How will do something because I keel Christ my priority?

During this Advent Season of anticipating and waiting let us renew our efforts to truly focus on what is the most important and keep our priorities in the right place? Let us make time to prepare our hearts to receive the joy of inviting Jesus into the midst of our crazy lives. Let the tree symbolize for us the infinite joy which is the result of the cross.

Last Sunday we took a look at the life of the of John the Baptist. He fearlessly stood up against sin and called everyone to change their ways. He spoke the truth no matter what. It cost him his head.

Jesus called John the greatest person that ever lived: Yes, greater than Abraham, Moses, David, and Elijah.

He was greater than Caesar Augustus who expanded the Roman Empire or Herod the Great with all his building projects. They were powerful and wealthy with the fanciest homes, finest clothes and best food. John the Baptist was homeless, wore camel skin and ate a diet of locusts and honey. We have no record of any miracle performed by John.

He had what mattered the most: greatness in the eyes of the Lord. Like Noah, he found favor in the eyes of the Lord.

Jesus also said that whoever is a citizen of the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist. How to do you enter the kingdom of heaven? By being born again. As an adopted child of God you become great in the eyes of God.

There was an old couple. In those days it was a disgrace to have no children. They continued to pray. The Bible says they were righteous in the sight of God and walking blamelessly in the commandments and requirements of the Lord. They still had no children. How many of us try to do what is right but our hearts remain heavy?

What do faithful people do when they face heartache? The keep right on serving God. God's good news came to Zacharias while he was serving in the temple.

God meets Zachariah while he was serving. Yes, we are waiting but not by just sitting. There is truth in the American proverb that idleness is the devil's workshop.



Zacharias means “God remembers” and Elizabeth means “His oath.” Together their names mean, “God remembers His oath.” In Psalm 89 God made an oath. “I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered. Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness-and I will not lie to David-that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun; it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky.”

God swore this oath by the greatest of all His attributes, His holiness. He promised David that one of his descendants would reign throughout eternity and the one He is talking about is Jesus Christ

Zacharias won the lottery! The highlight of his career! He is picked by lot out of 18,000 priests to burn incense in the temple! Many priests would go through an entire lifetime of service and never have the opportunity to go into the Holy of Holies and to burn incense and to offer all the sacrifices. Of course, that was the highpoint of all their service, walking into that most sacred place in all of Israel, the place where God dwelled; and there they would take the incense and put it on the fire, and as the smoke would rise from the fire, it was symbolic of the prayers of the people waiting outside. They would wait in complete silence till they saw the smoke rise from the Holy of Holies. Then they would fall on their faces and offer their thanksgiving and offer their petitions

before God as the priest walked out of the Holy of Holies with his arms raised and giving God's blessing on them. It was dramatic, a once in a lifetime experience for any priest.

While Zacharias is in there, an angel appears. "When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear". Do you ever think of angels as alarming? I do not know why we paint and make angels little chubby cute creatures.

In the Bible we read that angels are terrifying. Daniel describes an angel with a face like a lightning bolt, eyes like flaming torches of fire, arms and legs that gleam like



polished chrome, and a voice like that of thunder.

Of course he was scared. Suddenly here is a huge frightening creature in God's house.

¹³“The angel said, “Don't be afraid, Zechariah.” Your prayers have been heard”. I think Zechariah thought: “What did I pray?” Maybe he knew exactly what he had prayed, because he prayed the same prayer all his life. Maybe he wondered which prayer: for a child or for the nation.

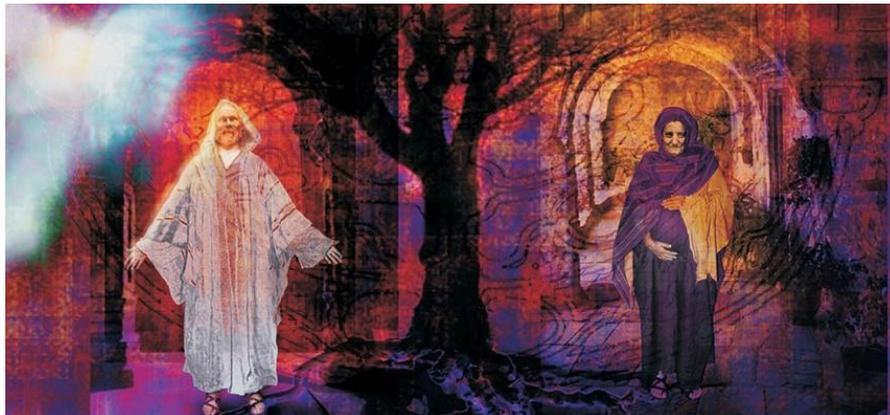
God says to you; I have heard your prayer. He is at work in our hearts as we pray. He gives us strength, guidance, and acceptance of His timing and His will. We need prayer mostly to be in relationship with our Father, to worship Him, to be in His presence.

Can we love God simply because He is God?

It is awesome to have answered prayers. How many prayers are still being prayed and how many of us are waiting? How many of us stopped praying and believing? One of the ways we can start Advent is by praising, praying and loving God: trusting that He hears.

Will we listen when he speaks?

The story is told of the atheist who became hopelessly lost in the forest. In his panic he decided to pray. Afterwards he was telling his friends that he prayed. They asked him what happened next. His reply, "There must not be a God because I got no answer. A guide came and led me out of the forest."



Do we recognize God's messengers?

God is not silent. He has spoken. The problem is all too often we are not listening or we are not hearing what we want to hear. Do we really believe when God's responds to our prayers?

"Zacharias said to the angel, "How can this be? My wife and I are very old."

I am a certified helicopter parent. I hover over my children like a helicopter to make sure they are safe and do not make bad decisions. One day we had a cleaning day at the church.

Emma joined and wanted to be helpful. One of the tasks was to clean the gutters on the roof. So three girls went outside. On the one side of the roof it was hard to put up a ladder. So we decided it would be the best to go on the roof. A good, strong man helped us to get a bigger ladder to climb on the roof. I passed on the opportunity to climb up. Gladly, younger woman volunteered to do so.

Emma was so eager and so wanting to go on the roof, too. She had never done that before and it looked so exciting. I am a mother – a protective mother. Do you really let a little girl to climb on the roof? Even if she wants to so badly? Of course not.

The good and strong man said, he would climb with Emma and hold her hand. Oh, I was put on spot. Emma was not as light as a feather. What if the man slips or



Emma slips? How can I know it will be OK? How can I trust when it feels scary? How can I be sure?

How could Zacharias know that he can trust that voice? Did he think God was not aware of their age? Did he forget about Abraham and Sarah, and Samson's parents and Samuel's parents? Could it be he did not believe the angel because he had to wait so long? Could it be that he did not believe because for many years there were no sign from God? Did he not believe because of what he had experienced? Were there too many years of emptiness and disappointments?

I decided to trust in this man and I let Emma to climb on the roof.

Can you trust God and truly hear His word? You can by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Notice, that angel did not introduce himself in the beginning, only when Zachariah chose not to believe or could not let himself to believe, because the reality of his age became bigger than reality of God's promise. Zacharias preferred the safety of doubt over the risk of disappointment... **Are your reality and your facts bigger than God's promise? Do you choose safety of doubt over the risk of disappointment?**

With God all things are possible.

"The angel replied, "I am Gabriel." (The same angel that appeared to Daniel 500 years earlier.) I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you".

I stand in God's presence and I bring you good news. God is not done; God is just starting. If you are old or young, waited all your life or just a week, God is just starting, God brings good news. His news is bigger than Christmas lights, bigger than Christmas trees, bigger than any gift you can get. God offers the gift of His presence, the gift of life, the gift of peace, the gift of redemption.

"Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen." Zacharias thought that God has been silent, God did not hear, did not listen, did not answer. Who is silent now?

Can you imagine the motions Zacharias used to explain his deeply spiritual experience inside the Holy of Holies? It must have been quite a sight. Perhaps you remember the old game called "Charades" where you have to act out the story without speaking while people guess the story. How do you describe an angel without speaking?

God is not silent. Do we hear what he says? Did you hear His word today? We are only silent and have nothing to say when we do not believe what we have heard. Are you silent about what God says and does?

Hear the word of God: "Do not be afraid, I have heard your prayers". Believe, do not be silent. Speak God's love "Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time".

Maybe we should be grateful to Zacharias because he shows us that even when we mess up God will keep God's promises. We might doubt but that cannot stop God.

The Gospel of Luke begin with Zacharias and the people praying in the temple. Luke ends the Gospel with the people in the temple praising God. Everything in between tells how the prayers were answered in the Person and work our Lord, Jesus Christ.