

ZACHARIAS: VOICE OF DISBELIEF

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 1:5-20. Max Thompson

PP#1: Luke 1:5-20

[5] 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. [6] Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. [7] But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

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PP#2: Luke 1:5-20.

[8] “Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, [9] according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. [10] And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.”

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PP#3: Luke 1:5-20

[11] Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. [12] When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. [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 give him the name John. [14] He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, [15] 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.

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PP#4: Luke 1:5-20

[16] Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. [17] 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."

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

Reader: "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."

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PP#5: Luke 1:5-20

[19] 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. [20] 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."

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PP#6: The Voices of Christmas

Zechariah: The Voice of Disbelief

"Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.'" - Luke 1:20

ZACHARIAS SPEAKS:

[Wearing a tallit.]

So, I'm told you are hearing the voices of Christmas? Well, I was one of them, although for a while I didn't have a voice! You see, mine was the voice of disbelief.

I am called Zacharias. You may recognize my name, although it is not I of whom you are thinking. There is the great prophet of the Holy Scriptures that told of God's promise to send a messiah. That prophet reminded the people that God remembers His promises.

PP#7: *Image of the OT prophet Zechariah*

There must be at least 30 others in our nation's history who had my name. It's a good name. It means "the Lord remembers." Across the long history of our people, God has never forgotten His promise. That's the message of the prophet Zacharias. And that is mine to you today as well. That first Christmas, I was the first to hear that the Lord remembered His promise to send a Savior, and that the Lord was about to do it!

PP#8: *Image of the priest Zechariah in Luke 1, in priestly garb.*

I'm married to Elisabeth, and for many years we had no children. You can't imagine how sad that is, unless you share our belief that the blessing and power of God are made known through a man's children and his children's children. When you have no children, how can you testify to the faithfulness of God to your generations to come? What good would it be if God remembered all His promises, but there was no one from my family to see them come to pass? Why should God take the branch of our family and prune us from His vine, Israel? We had no child. It was very hard.

Elisabeth and I were getting along in years. We had prayed for so long that God would provide a son for us. But that time passed. That hope was dead.

I am a Levite, of the tribe of Israel charged with the duties of the temple. Now some of us Levites are full-time priests at the temple and live in Jerusalem. Most of us, however, live all over Israel and take turns each year going to Jerusalem to serve for a few weeks.

Among those who are serving, the daily duties of the priesthood were assigned to different families by lot. One of these duties was burning incense. It meant standing in the Holy Place—just before the veil of the Holy of Holies—and burning incense to the Lord. The priest who was chosen would stand closer to the very mercy seat of God than anyone ever got to stand, except for the High Priest himself, and he only on the Day of Atonement.

One day I was so blessed that the lot fell to me. The other worshipers waited outside, praying. I entered the sanctuary, the Holy Place. I placed the incense upon the coals of the altar and a fragrant cloud of smoke arose. I was just about to pronounce the benediction of Aaron, but something startled me. I wasn't alone. Someone was standing next to the altar of incense. I looked. It was an angel.

PP#9: *Image of Zechariah seeing the angel in the Holy Place.*

The angel tried to calm my fears. But I was in shock. Then he said so many amazing things! He assured me that our prayers over many years would now be answered. Elisabeth would become pregnant and we would have a son.

The angel told me even what to name our son. His name would be John, and he would be a Nazirite, abstaining from alcohol and never cutting his hair. He would preach in the spirit and power of Elijah. Our son was appointed to prepare the hearts of the people for the Messiah. That meant the long-awaited Messiah was coming!

I think I was a little dizzy. This was way too much for me. I sputtered out something about how this was all not possible because of my wife was beyond the ability to bear children.

I have some advice for you. If an angel ever visits, don't doubt what he tells you! The angel told me his name. Gabriel—one of those angels who stood in the very presence of God. If I had to say something stupid to an angel, why couldn't it have been one of the lesser angels? But Gabriel? He told me that because I raised my voice in disbelief, Yehweh would take away my ability to raise my voice at all until I saw for myself all these things came to pass. Then he disappeared.

PP#10: *Image of Zechariah coming out of the temple and trying to address the people.*

The crowd of worshipers were outside waiting for me. What would I do? How would I tell them? I couldn't speak a word.

I left the sanctuary. I gestured and made signs. I tried to tell them what the problem was, but there was no way I could communicate with them. It was greatly frustrated. I couldn't tell my good news to a soul. They knew I had a vision, but I couldn't tell them any thing about it.

When I completed my shift in Jerusalem, I returned home. Elisabeth was always eager to hear all the news from Jerusalem. What is worse than a man with good news who does not speak? I had much to say, but no ability to say it. After years of disappointment we would finally have a baby. I used gestures and sticks to scratch the dirt. She just had to trust that God was doing something great.

Elisabeth conceived.

The neighbors were curious about my silence, and they wondered about Elisabeth, who kept herself out of the public eye.

PP#11: *Image of Mary arriving/visiting Elisabeth, with Zechariah also in the scene.*

In the sixth month of Elisabeth's pregnancy, we received a visit from her young cousin, Mary from Nazareth. Mary herself was pregnant, too. That was news of shame and scandal, for she was not yet married! She told us that the angel Gabriel had visited her and announced her miracle. Gabriel again! Elisabeth was not sure, but I quickly made it clear: you had better believe it!

How we enjoyed Mary's visit. She stayed with us until the time of John's birth. Elisabeth's time came. We had a beautiful, bouncing baby boy. The neighbors and relatives came from all over. Visitors filled our house with laughter and singing and praising the Lord.

And I? I sat quietly and watched. The Lord had remembered His promise...to me and to Israel!

Eight days after our little boy was born, we had him circumcised. This would declare him to be a son of the covenant and heir to the promises of Israel. It was the day to name him. Of course everyone assumed we would name the baby Zacharias after me. But Elisabeth said, as I had indicated to her, "We will call him John."

PP#12: *Image of when Zechariah writes on the tablet.*

Our friends objected that we had no relatives by that name. They looked at me. "Zacharias, what's the matter with Elisabeth? Aren't you going to name your son after yourself?" But I took my tablet and wrote, "His name shall be John." Then suddenly while I was gesturing to explain to my friends why we had to name the boy John, I began to speak. It had been months, and suddenly I spoke.

"John!" I said, "His name is John! That's what we'll call him." I began to prophesy and sing praises to the Lord. "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people and He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David."

PP#13: *Image of Zechariah talking again with great joy.*

God was so kind to me. Of the 12 voices of Christmas, only mine was raised in disbelief. Yet the Lord remembered His promise. In His great love and mercy, He took my disbelief and changed it into praise.

Now that I think about it, this may have something to do with what Christmas is all about: the Lord God taking our disbelief and changing it into praise.

What are your disbeliefs? In what ways do you struggle to have faith in God? Do believe He brings new life? Do you believe that the Lord can change your disbelief into praise? Do you believe the true meaning of Christmas?

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people!

PP#14: Prayer

Andrew Buschena leads a time of prayer.

ELIZABETH: VOICE OF BLESSING

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 1:21-25

Reader: Emily Masterjohn

PP#15: Luke 1:21-25

[21] Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. [22] 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.

Reader: Luke 1:21-25.

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PP#16: Luke 1:21-25

[23] When his time of service was completed, he returned home. [24] After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. [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."

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PP#17: The Voices of Christmas

Elizabeth: The Voice of Blessing

“‘The Lord has done this for me,’ Elizabeth said. ‘In these days He has shown His favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.’” - Luke 1:25

ELIZABETH SPEAKS:

[Reese, as Elizabeth.]

Barren.

If there's one word a woman in Israel dreads, that's it. Barren. Nowadays you can't imagine how sad that is. But for us, having children was proof of God's blessing upon us, and our connection to God's promises being known down through generations. It was our way to be a part of that covenant: seeing it in our own family.

PP#18: *Image of Hannah praying in the tabernacle.*

It wasn't so bad when I was young and we were first married. There was plenty of time to have children. But before long, every other young mother had her own child...except me. Even in my middle years, I kept hope that there was still an outside chance, and kept praying. But then one day, my body changed, and I was an old woman. If children are a blessing of God, then barrenness must be His curse. I bore that curse in the way everyone in our community treated us. I saw a kind of pity behind their eyes. I heard it between their words. It made my days bitter. I often thought of the stories of Sarah and Hannah. They were barren. I was just like them. Hannah had prayed daily

a the tabernacle for God to give her a baby. God heard Hannah's prayer and gave her a son. Sarah too! So why had He not answered mine? It seemed as though God didn't care.

PP#19: *Image of Elizabeth praying and in lament.*

My husband, Zacharias, is a good man. He's a priest descended from the family of Abijah [ă-Bĭ-jă]. My family also were priests from Aaron. Of course, the law does not require priests to marry within the priestly line, but it worked out that way for us. He takes his duties very seriously. In our house we have always been careful to do all that God's Word commands. And yet, I was barren. I used to lie awake at night and imagine that I heard Rachel saying to Jacob, "Give me children, or else I die." And didn't the psalmist say Yehweh would grant the barren woman a home? I went over it again and again. Hadn't I lived blamelessly before the Lord? Hadn't I done all that He had asked of me? Yet I was barren. What was wrong with me? The questions never went away.

I'm sorry. You'd think to hear me talk I was the voice of complaint. I'm not. I am the voice of blessing. But you will not fully understand the depth of that blessing unless you first know the depth of my pain.

PP#20: *Image of Zechariah coming home from the Temple, unable to speak to Elizabeth.*

One day when it was my husband's turn to serve at the temple in Jerusalem, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that Zachariah and I would have a son named John. He said our son would be special . . . I know, I know: every mother says the same thing. But not every mother has an angel say it's so! He said our son was to be dedicated to God even from my womb. John would turn many of our people back to God. Our son would come in the spirit and power of Elijah, the great prophet. Such wondrous promises!

When Zacharias came home after completing his duties at the temple, he couldn't speak a word. He was so ashamed. He used a writing tablet and made me understand that he had raised his voice in disbelief at the angel's disclosure. And because of that, he was struck speechless. Gradually I understood. The marvel of this promise seemed almost beyond belief, but it was true.

Then, sometime later, I conceived a child with Zacharias in my old age! Can you imagine! A miracle! I understand why Sarah of old named her son Isaac, which means laughter. Sometimes in the evening after our meal, we just sat together and laughed. Doesn't the thought of a pregnant granny seem funny to you? Well, I didn't dare go out. I didn't want to be a spectacle, with people staring at me and talking in hushed whispers. My John was to be filled with the Spirit of God while yet in my womb, and so I devoted those long quiet days to God.

PP#21: *Image for when pregnant Mary visits pregnant Elizabeth, perhaps without Zechariah.*

Then, in the sixth month of my pregnancy, my young cousin Mary arrived from Nazareth. I always had a special feeling for Mary. She had been like a grandchild to us and had spent many happy days as a young girl visiting with us. But the news she brought! Mary's visit was something of a puzzle to us. We had word only days before that she was coming. Why this hurried visit? We were glad to welcome her, of course, but you know how your imagination tries to answer questions when your mind doesn't have all the facts. I tried to keep from thinking that Mary might be in some kind of trouble. She was engaged to a nice young man from Nazareth, and the wedding day was not that far off. Why would she suddenly leave town? I hoped there were no problems.

Mary came to the door and I braced myself. I would know by the first look at her face. She came in. "Elisabeth?" she said. Her eyes told me she needed understanding. Then I realized—she was pregnant! Dread washed over me. But then my John gave me such a kick I almost doubled over. I sat down and decided I needed to listen.

Mary told of how the angel Gabriel had appeared to her, and told her that while still a virgin she would bear a child who would be the Messiah. It was hard to take. Gabriel? Messiah? Could it be?

PP#22: *Image of Mary and Elizabeth in the home.*

Zachariah, although not able to speak, tapped hard on the table indicating to me that she was speaking the truth. And it felt like my John was turning somersaults inside me. It dawned on me. If I were to bear the Messiah's forerunner, someone else must bear the Messiah! The realization broke on me in wave after wave of bright wonder. Mary's baby was the Messiah!

"Oh, Mary! I cried. "How blessed you are among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" Zachariah sat there the whole time grinning and nodding and clapping his hands. Mary already knew about our baby, but I told her everything again.

In order to divert some of the town's curiosity away from Mary's unexpected visit, I began going about in public again. Oh, what a curiosity I was! Our friends laughed and teased. Zacharias, who had always enjoyed a reputation for his witty tongue, had to leave the last word to others. Whenever I made my way past the shop of Eli, who chants in the synagogue, he would laugh and sing from the prophet, "Sing, O barren one! You who have borne no child. Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have not travailed!"

PP#23: *Image of Elizabeth holding John, in great joy.*

Yes, I was one of the twelve voices of Christmas. But at first my voice was a voice of lament. It was a voice of hopelessness, a voice of bitter resignation. Do you know that voice? Have you heard it? Has it been yours? Do you know what barrenness is? Perhaps you have children, but still know what other kinds of barrenness feels like.

That was my voice before Christmas. Then, God did a wondrous miracle. Yes, it was an amazing miracle for all of history, and God was bringing salvation for the whole world. But it was also a miracle for me. God took away my barrenness and gave me a new life, when He granted me a new life inside of me.

And so, of the voices of Christmas, mine became the voice of blessing. Blessing because I was no longer barren. Blessing because in the midst of my joy, Mary arrived and added to it. Blessing because her baby would bring God's greatest blessing to the world.

God still brings new life to barrenness. This is what Christmas is all about. New life...to my barren womb, to our sinful world barren of light and life, to each one of us who struggles with our own barrenness.

I lift up my voice of blessing. God brings blessing to barrenness. I know. He did for me. He did for all people. And He still does it. Perhaps that is precisely what you need this Christmas!

Oh my! It's getting late. I've got to get to the shop before he closes. May you hear the voice of blessing this Christmas! Shalom!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR NOV. 29, 2015

Christmas Series: “The Voices of Christmas”

Sermon #2: “Zechariah: The Voice of Disbelief”

“Elizabeth: The Voice of Blessing”

Opening prayer

Introductions: Introduce yourself & share a time when God answered your prayer, giving you joy.

Context: Skim Luke 1:1-20. Review: What is going on in this chapter?

Read: Luke 1:21-25

1. Verse 21-22. What was the immediate consequence for Zechariah’s disbelief? How did it affect his ministry at the temple?
2. Verse 23-24. How easy, do you think, it was for Elizabeth to believe Zechariah’s unspoken story?
3. Verse 25. Share about a time in your life when you were able to speak these words of Elizabeth.

Read: Luke 1:39-45

4. Why do you think Mary went to Elizabeth? Draw from the story so far to explain your answer.
5. Verse 41. What is the significance, do you think, of Elizabeth’s baby jumping in her womb when she met Mary?
6. Verse 43. What do you think Elizabeth believed about who Mary’s baby was?

Read: Luke 1:56-66.

7. Verse 61. Why were the people perplexed that Elizabeth’s baby was to be named John? What, do you think, Zechariah and Elizabeth had shared with them up to this point about their baby?
8. Verse 64. Why is it significant that Zechariah’s voice returned after writing on the tablet?
9. Verse 65. What did Zechariah do when his voice returned?

10. Application: What will you take away from this passage? How will you live it out?