

Zechariah: The Sound in the Silence

Sermon Series: Advent/Christmas 2022

Sunday, November 28, 2021

Rev. Steve Rath

Scripture Lesson: Luke 1:5-25

Slides 1-3: Cover Slide and Scenes from *It's a Wonderful Life*

As Christmas approaches us again, we are met again by that faithful collection of classic movies that get us ready for the holiday season. Among them is *It's a Wonderful Life*. Frank Capra's beloved classic with Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed brings our spirits into the holiday season and turns our minds toward the reason and meaning behind this special time of year. What would Christmas be without the venerable George Bailey, Bedford Falls, the savings and loan, and of course the beloved angel Clarence, sent from God into George's life when tragedy threatens to unravel all that George has worked to achieve with his business? Standing on the bridge, George is overwhelmed by the thought of what could happen to him, his family, and his reputation in the community. We can hear George thinking to himself, *Why me, Lord?* Only a chance encounter with an angel helps him see all he has done that has meant so much to so many.

George Bailey's encounter with an angel wasn't the first one, you know. Angels have always been some of God's greatest instruments behind the most famous event in all human history. Each week leading up to Christmas, we will learn from a different angelic encounter and the characters in the Christmas story who must all wrestle with the question of Christmas: *Why me, Lord?* It's the question most all of us have asked at least once in our lives, and so maybe this Christmas season we'll learn from those who've asked it themselves.

Slide 4: Cover Slide

Luke, our Gospel writer for this story, tells us that God's message of Christmas begins with a man by the name of Zechariah, a priest. He and his wife, Elizabeth both come from families where serving as a priest has run in the family for generations. So what Zechariah is asked to do is certainly nothing new, but the timing of everything would be new indeed.

All throughout their marriage Zechariah and Elizabeth have been model citizens in the things of God. Being a priest, you'd suppose that this would come with the job description. But behind all their faithful service and devotion to God, a question has always been in the back of their minds: *Will God give us a child to call our own before we die?* This is not a selfish question, but a most important one. Being Jewish and facing the prospect of death meant the end of a family's lineage. Zechariah's standing in the community was at stake. He and his wife weren't getting any younger. How many prayers must he have prayed to God over his lifetime for others and for himself. If God would only answer just this one prayer, he could die in peace. Humiliated and hopeless, Zechariah and Elizabeth found themselves squarely in an impossible situation, and because it *was* a truly impossible situation, they needed to know they could count on God. We need to know that when we're face to face with our own impossible situation, that we can count on God too. Let's just see what God has in mind for Zechariah (and for us...)

Scheduling a priest to be on call for temple prayers, sacrifices and offerings happened with a roll of the dice. When your number comes up, it's your turn to serve. And wouldn't you know that Zechariah would be the lucky one? His week was here. As one of 20,000 eligible priests, this one week would become a prelude to the most climatic, dramatic moment of his life. Not only was Zechariah to serve in the temple, he was also to provide the holy offering of incense to God – an offering that any priest could give once during his lifetime – and this would be his moment! As the smoke of the incense rose, prayers were ascending to heaven. Zechariah was praying. The people were praying. Would God hear? Would God answer? He'd prayed so many times before, but to no avail. *Why me, God? Why now? Why can't*

Elizabeth share in the blessing of motherhood? Why can't I die with the peace and assurance of knowing that I'll have a son with my name? Would the rising scent of incense somehow make this time different?

Slide 5: Zechariah and the Angel by William Blake

Standing on his own bridge between faith and doubt, Zechariah meets an angel of his own: Gabriel, who brings his own announcement. *There's breaking news from heaven sent just for you, Zechariah. Don't be afraid. God has heard your prayer! There will be a child after all!* God stepped in late in the game and brought hope where there was none. Hope, Zechariah. Hope, Elizabeth, after all these years.

This angel's announcement to Zechariah was going to be some answer to their prayers! This child's birth would be far from a "normal" delivery. His coming would be so momentous, so dramatic, that anyone and everyone would know that God himself was not just going to set the due date for their son, he would give him his name, his purpose, and be there to deliver this boy to the world! He wasn't the *one* whom Israel had been praying for, but he would be the one to come before the Messiah. He would be the preview of coming attractions – John the Baptist.

What Zechariah doesn't realize quite yet is that God has a greater plan unfolding than Zechariah can see. Among the things that the Bible says about John is that he would be filled with the Spirit. The angel's message to Zechariah was that his son, John, was to play a special role in the unfolding of God's eternal plan.

"He will go on before the Lord"¹ - Before the Lord!? The Lord himself is coming! "In the spirit and power of Elijah" – God's last recorded words in the Old Testament promised the return of the prophet Elijah. (See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts

¹ Luke 1:17 New International Version.

of the children to their fathers.)² "To turn the hearts" - "Turn" is reference to John's later message of repentance. (Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near!)³ "A people prepared for the Lord" – If God is to lead his people, they must be ready to respond. God wasn't simply answering the hopes and prayers of a couple in their golden years. He was about to answer the prayers of all those standing outside the Temple praying too. Zechariah would never be forgotten ever again because of what God was about to do, but it seems that he still needs a little convincing.

Slide 6: Cover Slide

For those who like details in their answers to prayer, the angel made sure that Zechariah got some. Yet, for someone supposedly so holy, Zechariah is also very human. Perhaps he had prayed this prayer before and been disappointed at the lack of results. Perhaps he dealt with a recurring case of discouragement brought on by the frailties of old age. Zechariah, though, must ask the question we'd ask: "How can I *know* this will happen? I'm an old man now and my wife is well along in years." Translation: *I am not getting my hopes up to high, because I've been burned before and I don't want to be burned again. Father time and Mother Nature better work fast if this is going to happen.*

At the center of this story is a man whose heart is filled with doubt. God is surely ready, but Zechariah's not ready. The angel's response to him is one that I imagine filled with lots of emotion and exasperation: *Zechariah, it's me. I am Gabriel, an angel sent from heaven to bring you good news, and now you don't believe it! Just for that, you won't be able to speak to anyone until the child is born!*

For all those who ever doubted they would see the coming of the Messiah, Zechariah himself would become proof positive that the one they'd been awaiting was about to arrive. God wasn't answering the prayers of a man

² Malachi 4:5-6 New International Version.

³ Matthew 3:2 New International Version.

inside the Temple, he was answering the prayers of all those standing outside the Temple too!

The same God who brought a child to a hopeless elderly couple is still God today. And he still specializes in hopeless cases – Your prayer has been heard! He wants to breathe hope into the stale air of the seemingly impossible situations in your life. So, look up, and let him know you could use a little hope.

The message of hope from Gabriel doesn't end with the news of a child for Zechariah and Elizabeth. The message of hope is for everyone, whether your name is Zechariah, George Bailey, or whatever is on your birth certificate. Whether you live in Jerusalem, Bedford Falls, Boise or Boston, Barbados or Bryan, Ohio – your prayer has been heard!

This Christmas Season you and I will do all kinds of things to prepare ourselves for December 25th. In the midst of all of our preparations, I hope you'll find yourself interrupted a time or two with the reminder that Christmas was God's idea for the world, and most especially for you. While I cannot promise you a visit from an angel, I do hope that your heart is touched with a visit from God, reminding you of his presence, his Promise, and his answer to your prayers. Thanks be to God!

Closing Prayer:

Lord, our calendars are already telling us that the Christmas is going to be here before we're ready for it. There's so much we feel we have to do and so little time to do it. In the rush and busyness of this season, interrupt us God. Stop us and remind us of your presence. If we have nothing else prepared and ready for anyone else, we want to be sure our hearts are prepared for you. And if our hearts are ready, then all we need is ready for your arrival. Lord, hear our prayer in Jesus' Name, AMEN.