

Advent 01 – The Prophecy About John

12/01/2024

Scripture 1: (Lk. 1:5-25 ESV)

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."

And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."

And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

Sermon:

The story of John the Baptist's birth in the Gospel of Luke is like a perfect fairy story: it is perfectly “wrong” in every way.

- Every detail given is one hundred percent wrong; at least, it is wrong according to what our worldly experience teaches us to expect for the birth of such an important figure like John.
- This incident is filled with such improbable and unlikely details that could not have been arranged by accident, nor would they have been imaginable by any human author.
 - No human person could have fabricated this stories to support or justify John's divine calling and purpose; and,
 - the specific details of John the Baptist's origin were easily verifiable by contemporary witnesses.

Thus I say that Luke's account is “perfectly wrong” because it could only be perfectly right and perfectly true if it was enacted through divine planning and divine enacting.

Luke records that a “*whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense*”, when Zechariah received his angelic visitation. Specifically, they “*...were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple...*”, therefore there were innumerable witnesses to his being struck dumb. Furthermore, after this event, he continued working in the Temple, for a time. He was surely there long enough that if he were “faking”, then he would have been quickly found out, unless the religious establishment was also “in on it”. However, judging by their later response to John, they clearly were not supportive of his suggested “reforms”. Therefore, if this story was false, then it would have been all too easy for the “Establishment” to refute it and prove it wrong.

This story's many specific details work together to support a narrative of redemption that is far greater than the sum of its parts. The way in which the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to write his Gospel; the way in which he compiles the details and builds upon them exponentially, instead of linearly is itself a narrative “miracle”.

Although we should all be familiar with the sweep and scope of this story, I will provide a short summary before we begin to dig into the details.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were members of a priestly family within the Levites, which meant that they naturally belonged to the elite in the religious community. They were a righteous couple, meaning that they were faithful and obedient to Torah, and were considered blameless before men. However, they were older and unfortunately, in their culture's eyes, they would have been considered cursed (at worst) or in the LORD's disfavor (at least), because they had never been blessed with children (Deuteronomy 7:14; the opposite of the promised blessing).

Then one day while Zechariah was working in Jerusalem {each division was appointed two annual periods of time to serve in Jerusalem; essentially, one month “On” and five months “Off”}, after being randomly chosen, he went into the Temple to offer the regular incense offering, something that was “business as usual”. Yet while he was inside alone (so, no witnesses), an angel appeared to him beside the altar. This angel, who called himself Gabriel, pronounced a prophecy concerning Zechariah's as yet, non-conceived son and what his divinely appointed work would be. But Zechariah did not believe Gabriel and so, to prove God's point, Zechariah was made mute until the angel's prophecy came true. Zechariah was “struck dumb”. He was speechless for the rest

of his time serving in the Temple, and also after he returned home to his wife until she conceived and bore him a son.

Now Zechariah found this prophecy unbelievable for two principal reasons:

- The LORD had been prophetically “silent” for about four hundred years, ever since the words of Malachi, the prophet; and,
- Zechariah and Elizabeth were both old. Their circumstance and situation was like that of Abraham and Sarah when they received God's promise of a son (Genesis 15), and Zechariah was himself, likely too pious (or religiously conscientious) to expect that the LORD might now bless him and Elizabeth in a similar manner, much less give them a son for such an important purpose as the angel had prophesied.
 - Who were they to deserve such divine favor and honor? They were no one and despite their worldly righteousness, they did not deserve it; preserving this all as a matter of God's grace and mercy.

Now, the first detail which the Holy Spirit provides us in this story, is the description of Zechariah and his wife as being “righteous”. This description closely echoes Abraham and Sarah, yet the circumstance of Elizabeth's barrenness is also similar to the stories of Elkanah and Hannah, the parents of Samuel, as well with Manoah and his unnamed wife, the parents of Samson. But the similarities go beyond the shared fact of a woman's barrenness:

- Hannah offered prayers to the LORD for a child, privately, at the Tabernacle (1 Samuel 1); something which Gabriel implied Zechariah also was presently doing, saying “*Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son...*”;
- Like Zechariah, Manoah's wife also had an “angel of the LORD” appear to her, privately. Not only did he prophesy that she would have a child, but he also instructed them concerning how he was to be raised and what he would do for the LORD (Judges 13); similar to what this angel prophesies about John.

Thus, through Luke, the Holy Spirit brings those old stories from Old Testament Scripture forward to inform and better explain John and his intended role. Furthermore, they also demonstrate that what the LORD did with Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John was not something innovative or new, but was a greater example (a greater antetype) of something that God had done before.

The next important detail to note are the specific names of every “character” involved in the story. Remember names were always considered very important in ancient story-telling. Every name was believed to be something far greater than just a collection of syllables that identify a person, because for the Jewish and Hebrew mindset, names are foundational to who someone is. Names were often given to a child because of something descriptive about them [as Esau, which meant “red” because of his hair and complexion (Genesis 25:25); or Moses, which meant “to draw” because he was drawn from the water (Exodus 2:10)], or something prophetic and hopeful [like Solomon, whose name meant “peace”, in hope of peace for Bathsheba following the death of her first son (2 Samuel 12:24) and perhaps in hope of a peaceful reign, as David's eventual heir].

Names were so important that the very first job which God gave to Adam was to name everything (Genesis 2:19).

- The first man, Adam, was named such because he was made from the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7); because the ancient Hebrew term for “ground” or “dirt” is *adamah*.

- Adam comes from *adamah*, making it descriptive.
- The first woman, Eve or *Chava*, was named such because she would be the mother of all living people (Genesis 3:20); since the ancient Hebrew term for “alive” or “living” is *chayah*.
 - Chava comes from *chayah*, making it descriptive.
- The Hebrew term for a “man” or a “husband” is *ish*, while the term for a “woman” or a “wife” is *ishah*; connecting the two in a verbal relationship.
- Joseph or *Yosef*, Jacob's son, meant “he will increase” and foreshadowed the various increases which he brought about in Egypt and for his family, making it prophetic.
- Abimelech, Gideon's illegitimate son, meant “my father is king” referencing the twin facts that Gideon ruled as king in all but name but also that he did not have a share in his father's name; that he was not numbered with his sons and had no right of inheritance.
- David means “beloved”, as King David was beloved by the LORD, making it a hopeful invocation of the LORD's blessing

As you can now better see, Hebrew names were not just what someone was called, but they were descriptive of them and they defined who they ultimately were, especially for those actively involved in the scope of redemptive history.

So, when we consider the names of different people within this story, they tell us something fundamental about the person, their role within the story, and their relationship to God.

- **Zechariah** – His name means “YHVH remembers” and within this story, it shows how the LORD remembers and keeps His covenant and His promises. As the LORD “remembered” His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Exodus 2:24, so too the LORD remembered His prophetic promises and sent a messenger in order to prepare the way for the Messiah (Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1).
- **Abijah** – His name meant “YHVH is my father” and its mention reminds us of the LORD's sovereignty over all children of the covenant and the LORD's authority over their system of religion {as well as offering unique detail which could help with identifying precisely when this occurred (or at least narrow it to one of two periods of time, since the Temple service was divided between six clans, with each working a consistent one month rotation)}. Since the LORD is the One who appointed the descendants of Levi to His regular service and specifically the children of Aaron to their priestly duty, it was appropriate that someone belonging to that line should serve as the final “Mosaic mediator” as the covenant administration transitioned from the Law to the Gospel.
- **Elizabeth** or *Elisheva* – Her name means “My God is an oath” or “My God's oath” and it emphasizes her trust and hope in God's promises: His eternal covenant and this new promise of a son. She had trusted God's promise all her life, although she had not yet received the fullness of His blessings. She remained faithful because she trusted that God is always faithful to His oaths (Exodus 32:13).
- **John** or *Yochanan* (derived from *Yehochanan*; same as a son of King Josiah named in 1 Chronicles 3:15; *chanan* as in Genesis 43:29) – His name means “YHVH is gracious” and here, in the person of John, God's graciousness was manifested to Zechariah and Elizabeth: by giving them a son in their old age, as

to Abraham and Sarah; and to God's chosen people Israel: by giving them someone to prepare them for the Christ to come by setting things straight, and heralding His appearance.

- **Elijah** or *Eliyahu* (or Elias in the Greek) – His name means “YHVH is my God” and by prophetically relating John to him, as being “*in the spirit and power of Elijah*”, Luke not only invokes the authority of the first Old Testament prophet and shares it with the last, but he also foreshadows the quality and character of John's future ministry as being an echo of Elijah's. {Multiple reasonable comparisons can be made between Herod Antipas and Herodius with Ahab and Jezebel, in relation to John the Baptist: Ahab both feared and respected Elijah both because of the power he represented and because of his popularity, much as Herod felt about John; while Herodius held a grudge against him because of his preaching, plotting and arranging for his death (Matthew 14), as Jezebel constantly tried to do to Elijah.}
- **Gabriel** – His name means “Mighty man' of God”. The Hebrew term *gabor* was an expression used to denote a pious and righteous warrior: someone who is faithful, true, and reliable, willing and able to whatever is necessary to fulfill the LORD's commands. {Gabriel is someone who would surely get a *Message to Garcia*¹.} This is understood to be the same angelic Gabriel that appeared to Daniel during his visions (Daniel 8:16, 9:21), explaining and interpreting them, which makes him someone that we should trust to give God's Word to us straight {although coming from an elite priestly family, it is more probable that Zechariah was a Sadducee (someone who did not consider the Prophets as authoritative Scripture, but should still have been familiar with them), which makes this encounter to shatter his worldview even more}, because if he explained to Daniel, the wisest guy in all of Babylon, everything that he recorded and Daniel trusted him, then the angel deserves our benefit of the doubt and trust.

So, each name and each person contributed something important to this story, and they do it perfectly. They harmonize so well, that it could not be by accident, because it would have been too easy to disprove if this story was fabricated.

These are perfect names for a perfect story and such a cast of characters could not have been brought together by mere chance; it could only have been planned and, if this story was not fabricated (and no evidence has ever been brought forward to suggest that it was), then it must have been planned by the Author of all things, for, as Sherlock Holmes said “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.” (The Sign of Four, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle). This story could only have been planned and arranged by God.

The knowledge of God's work in the past combined with these providential names combine to set the stage for this Act of “the greatest [and truest] story ever told²”. Together, they informed this 1st Century present, without any need of further contemporary explanation, but today, because our individual knowledge and understanding of these things is deficient in comparison, we need to have these elements expanded for us.

Now that we have a better understanding of these seemingly unimportant details and how they establish the context for John the Baptist's birth, we may examine what exactly it is that Gabriel prophesies about him. "*Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will*

1 <https://courses.csail.mit.edu/6.803/pdf/hubbard1899.pdf>

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Greatest_Story_Ever_Told

go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

First and foremost, Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a son. That they would finally get to experience the joy of being parents and they would have a child to comfort them and care for them in their old age because the LORD is gracious and merciful. The LORD would bless them with the fulfillment of their hope and dream. The LORD would bless them with a form of worldly satisfaction while He would also bless them by the fulfillment of their eternal hope.

Second, not only will they be filled with joy and gladness because of their son, others would too. Many would rejoice for Zechariah and Elizabeth, and they would also rejoice with them, and they will also rejoice over what their son will someday do for God. They will be proud of him because "...*he will be great before the Lord.*", implying that he would be someone notable, like a prophet or that perhaps he would become High Priest, one day. Perhaps he would be the one to heal their religious divisions: uniting the Sadducees, Pharisees, and the Essenes of Qumran. But regardless, whatever it was that he might specifically do, his parents should expect it to be for the LORD and for His eternal glory.

Third, that "... *he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb...*". Their son would be set apart by God for the LORD's purpose from before his birth. He would be set apart as a Nazirite (Leviticus 6:2-21; verse 3 especially). He would be set apart to the LORD, placed under a vow by his parents (like Samson and Samuel before him) {this could also be connected with his mother Elizabeth, as they would be obligating their son to a perpetual divine oath}, much as we consecrate the children of Christian believers: setting them apart for Christ by placing them under God's covenantal oath and ourselves vowing to raise them in the Christian faith. Doing this to John and doing this for John, would place them under a similar obligation. To help protect and preserve his vow, they themselves would need to lead and teach him by example; although they were already accounted as being righteous, they would need to do better.

Their son would be a prophet like Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5), set apart by God before birth. Yet also, as such, they surely would fear that he would come to public grief, like this spiritual predecessor, for speaking truth to power, for standing up for what is right, for being a true prophet, and for remaining faithful to the LORD even when it could end up costing him his life {as it would}.

However fourth, they were promised that his ministry would be successful; that it would be fruitful for the LORD and His glory, because their son, "...*will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God...*". Their son would become an effective religious catalyst who would lead to a revival of repentance and faith in the LORD; a wonderful promise that, even despite all of the attendant worldly negatives, is something which would make a pair of righteous parents proud of their godly son.

Yet to do so, their son must live and work before the LORD "...*in the spirit and power of Elijah...*", which meant that he would be bold and fearless in his witness in order to see righteous fruit grow on account of his testimony. Also, while he would make powerful enemies, he would receive a glorious reward from the LORD {although they would not expect him to be translated directly into heaven, they would surely expect him to earn a prominent place in God's divine kingdom}. Like Elijah after his battle against the prophets of Ba'al at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), through his ministry people would see and remember that the LORD is God alone, and God's chosen people would once again turn to Him in faith and obedience. Their son would "... *turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just...*", so that they would become righteous and holy, as the LORD is holy (Leviticus 11:45), so as "...*to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.*".

This is the ultimate promise in Gabriel's prophecy, that through Zechariah's son, God's people would become prepared: they would be made ready; for the Messiah: for the "day of visitation" (Malachi 3:1-3) and finally for the great and terrible "Day of the LORD" (Isaiah 13:13, 66:14-24). He would become the precursor of their eschatological hope, heralding God's greatest work of redeeming grace for His people.

But, since judgment must begin within the household of God (1 Peter 4:17), the first person whose heart John needed to help turn belonged to Zechariah. "*And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."*" Because of who he was (being a priest), and because of his piety (being considered righteous before men), and even despite being confronted by the LORD's messenger: an angel in the Temple; Zechariah doubted the angel's message. Therefore, he also doubted God's power and faithfulness. Thus, "*...the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."*" The angel issued a command of silence to Zechariah: a prohibition on speech until his son would be born and rightly named, John. This convinced Zechariah and "encouraged" him to believe and act out of his faith because his participation and cooperation were necessary to the fulfillment of this prophecy.

- If he wanted to speak again, then he needed to believe and to do his part, in obedience to the divine decree, to see these things be fulfilled.

Then finally, in his silence, Zechariah returned home after the conclusion of his time of service and his wife Elizabeth conceived, which prompted her to give thanks and praise God, "*Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.*". Thus:

- When the LORD remembers (Zechariah) His covenant and His people: His divinely chosen and adopted children (Abijah), God's oath (Elizabeth), as pronounced through the LORD's power and authority (Gabriel), was fulfilled through His giving of grace (Yochanan) in the birth of a son.

So, as you can see, the narrative surrounding the prophesy of John the Baptist's birth truly is a true and perfect story because it foretells, in miniature, the story of Jesus' birth within God's plan of redemptive history.

This December, as we continue to study through the beginning of Luke's Gospel during Advent, let us consider this story of Hope and think about how it applies to our own life.

Zechariah and Elizabeth lived with unrealized hope: without a child and without a Davidic king; so the LORD filled them with a new hope in a smaller promise to encourage them in their hope of His bigger promises. So, just as the birth of their son John: this one act of God's grace and mercy; served to build up their hope and confidence in God's promise of the Messiah, let this story and our experiences of faith build up our hope as well.

Today, we live in a spiritual tension hoping and trusting in Jesus Christ.

- We know that He reigns over the whole creation: that He is Sovereign; because He is sovereign in our heart, yet we cannot easily see the effect of His reign in the world around us. The new media, social media, entertainment, and even our local interactions at the store offer little encouraging evidence that God is in control; until we think about how much worse everything could be, then we can see His power restraining our human sinfulness.

- Thus we are made better able to patiently wait for His glorious appearing, when we shall see the whole earth acknowledge Him as King and all shall bow down and every tongue confess that Jesus is the LORD!
- We know that our sins are forgiven by the blood of Christ because we feel remorse and repent whenever we do still sin. Whenever we are assured of His mercy, we feel a different kind of peace of conscience because we can feel the warmth of His love as we do all things through a desire to please Him; rather than the selfish, cold, and unfeeling emptiness experienced by a conscience utterly seared by sin.
 - Thus we are encouraged in hope, knowing that as the hour of our passing grows ever nearer, because of what Jesus has done for us, we shall stand justified before God's throne and we shall be approved of and welcomed into His eternal kingdom as the LORD's beloved sons and daughters.

We live our faith within the tension between “Is” and “Not Yet”; therefore, we must be patient and active in our faith as we await Christ's return and His final fulfillment. Therefore, we continue to live in the Hope of Jesus Christ and His promises.

AMEN