

## Advent 04 – The Birth of John

12/22/2024

### **Scripture 1: (Lk. 1:57-2:1 ESV)**

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John."

And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name."

And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

## Sermon:

Following her expression of joy, Mary remained with Elizabeth and Zechariah for three months (Luke 1:56). It is commonly suggested that she did so in order to become familiar with the “ins and outs” of pregnancy, since Elizabeth was six months pregnant when she arrived. However, that really is not the most probable reason for Luke to have included this note about her stay.

The document which the Roman Catholics predominantly lean upon for their excessive and idolatrous Mariology {their worship or “veneration”} is an apocryphal, extra-canonical book called “The Infancy Gospel of James”<sup>1</sup>; a text which was likely written sometime between 140-170 AD, long after all the principal parties had passed and also after the second generation of Christians.

- That fanciful text recounts Mary's alleged miraculous birth to elderly parents.
- It suggests a closer relationship to the priest Zechariah, establishing him as her guardian in her youth, to explain why/how a girl from the tribe of Judah might be related to a family of Levites.
- It is also the proof text for the doctrine of her extraordinary virginity and her special holiness, as having herself been born sinless.

It is clearly a fantastical elaboration upon and strange fusion between the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke and it has never been accepted as part of the Biblical canon, even by the Romans. However, if a person was inclined to accept the broad sweep of the narrative (at most) as being true, then they might reasonably presume that Mary remained with Zechariah and Elizabeth so as to be instructed by Zechariah (being the duty of a Levite and priest) regarding all that she ought to know about the Messiah she was carrying {something which would have been logically difficult due to his mute state}. But, no.

Still, I think the answer for why she stayed with Zechariah and Elizabeth is much simpler and it does not require us reading anything more into the text than which the Holy Spirit has inspired. Although it is not expressly stated, it is implied that Mary was present for the birth of John the Baptist, making her Luke's most probable and reliable source for this part of his Gospel narrative. {Despite claims of inconsistencies or unreasonableness, there is an internal logic to the Gospel stories which no human author could have crafted.} This was simply Luke's way of “citing” his source.

Now today's text divides into two parts:

- the first is the story of John's birth with its fulfillment of Gabriel's pronouncement; while,
- the second is Zechariah's prophesy; his ultimate response to John's birth and the LORD's graciousness.

*“Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.”* It is likely that some folks were skeptical about her condition {as “bloody” Queen Mary I (b.1516 - d.1558) of England<sup>2</sup> allegedly believed in her false pregnancies, which many people today believe were symptoms of something like ovarian cancer, cysts, or uterine cancer} but once her pregnancy was proven true with the birth of her child, they rejoiced with her for her good fortune. Now they knew her to be *makarios*, blessed by the LORD. Yet still Zechariah was silent.

1 <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/infancyjames.html>

2 <https://tudordynasty.com/queen-marys-false-pregnancies/>

Then, “...on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father; but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name."”. People have always been very unimaginative in how they choose names for their children (even as some today make utterly outrageous choices).

- Sometimes the names we choose for children, simply do not carry any meaning or significance beyond us merely liking the sound of it.
- Sometimes children are named for family members (like for instance, I am named for my two grandfathers) as a sign of respect or honor, and that is what they were doing in suggesting he be called Zechariah.
- Sometimes children are named because of a hope for the future, selecting a name which the parents believe will be providential or fortuitous (like Jacob's son, Joseph, meaning “he will increase”). And,
- Sometimes children are named because of some circumstance related to their birth (like the naming of Jacob's son, Benjamin, which meant “son of my right hand”, instead of “Ben-oni”, which Rachel wished him to be called, meaning “son of my sorrow” or “son of my strength” because she gave her last strength in birthing him).

Thus, both names made sense. They were both reasonable selections since John (or better, *Yochanan*) means “YHVH is gracious” and clearly He had been gracious to them in their old age.

Then, without implying that Elizabeth did not know what she was talking about (they probably just asked her first, since she was the one who could speak) “...they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John."”. Thus Zechariah agreed with her, validating and verifying her choice of name; even as it does beg the question, “Why did they not just give him the writing tablet to begin with?”.

But then, immediately after he named his son John, “*And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors.*”. This guy who had been silent for most of the past year suddenly began speaking again, praising and blessing the LORD; therefore, it is no surprise that they wondered and were afraid. But they were not afraid of Zechariah or his son, instead this was an inspired “holy fear”, a reverence and sense of wonder at the amazing work of God.

“*And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea...*” It is no surprise that this event became the talk of the town because it was clear to everyone who saw and heard that something miraculous, extraordinarily miraculous, had happened for the first time, in a very long time, as “...all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.”. What Luke describes in this last portion is the general passage of time; meaning the time of John's youth, as evidenced by him being raised as a Nazarite, dedicated to God, and being trained as a Levitical priest, as his father was before him. There was something about John, as a youth, which made it clear that God's favor was upon him; that he was someone special, but Scripture does not explain precisely what.

So, with John's naming, Gabriel's word to Zechariah was fulfilled and where hope was first kindled in his heart, now the peace that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7) burned within his heart, consuming all doubt and fear with his faith and joy in the LORD, and the perfect, fairy-tale like story comes full circle and is completed.

But what about Zechariah's final response? He who doubted God, lacked faith, and was silenced now could speak again. What would he say?

“And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying...” not only would he speak, but he would speak under the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, publicly speaking prophesy. But remember, prophesy is not just one singular type of thing, it is not limited to just special revelation as found in Scripture.

- Prophecy is saying, “Thus saith the LORD...” and therefore, speaking God's Word.
- Prophecy is both forth-telling and fore-telling, speaking divine truths in love, in accord with what Scripture has revealed. And,
- Prophecy is also dividing, expositing and explaining God's Holy Word, as in preaching, except Pastors do not speak new revelation nothing we say can or will be added to Scripture.

All true prophesy, done in the right spirit, flows out from the influence of the Holy Spirit, especially when it involves praising God and giving Him glory.

Zechariah's prophesy begins by him blessing the LORD and extolling His covenant faithfulness, similar to Mary's song, *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”*

- Zechariah blesses and glorifies God for His special, divine attention to His chosen people in “visiting” them.
- Zechariah blesses and glorifies God for redeeming His people.
  - But what did he understand them to be redeemed from? Ancient Egypt, their present subservience to Rome, or sin and death?
- Then, looking ahead to things uncompleted in time, yet decreed by the LORD from eternity past, Zechariah blesses and glorifies God for raising up “a horn of salvation” from the “house of David”, as spoken by the earlier prophets.
  - This “horn of salvation” presents two possible images:
    - an animal's horn - which implies that this salvation would come through violence, bloodshed, and domination by a Davidic heir; Or,
    - the horns of an altar – which imply an image of sacrifice on the part of a Davidic heir.
  - When we say that the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jews were looking for the wrong kind of Messiah, it is less that they did not know the Scriptures and more that they just simply misinterpreted them.
    - Their expectation of worldly deliverance and a newly established Davidic empire was a worldly interpretation, and thus wrong.
    - Their incorrect interpretation merely proved that they did not understand the LORD's character or what His ultimate plan for our redemption was; they were often so close, but no cigar.

- Zechariah blesses and glorifies God for His promise that they”... *should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us...*”.
  - Yet it was understandable for them to make the mistake of assuming that this meant the Romans and the whole Hellenistic worldview because they did not recognize who or what our true enemy is: Satan and our sinfulness.
  - Their incorrect assumptions and wrong understandings were unfortunately reasonable because no one ever thinks about the puppeteer while the puppets are on stage; so long as he remains hidden behind the curtain, we remain distracted by the lesser things held before us.
- Zechariah blesses and glorifies God for showing them “...*the mercy promised to our fathers...*” and for remembering “...*his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham...*”, the promise of Genesis 17, “...*to be God to you and to your offspring after you.*” (Gen. 17:7 ESV).
  - This promise, this covenant, is very specific but with wide, open-ended implications for us because having God, the only God, the Sovereign King and Creator of the Universe, choose to willingly bind Himself to a people: to be their God and them His people, His treasured possession; is the greatest of possible mercies and grace, for otherwise, one must naturally be at enmity with God, the only God, and if you try to stand against Him, then you are doomed.
- Lastly, Zechariah blesses and glorifies God for why the LORD has done all of this, so that we “...*might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*”.
  - We have been chosen and we are called to serve the LORD in holiness and righteousness all day, every day; in every way and in every place. We exist to worship and glorify God, for that is what it simply means to “*serve Him without fear*” - to worship God alone, with awe and reverence and love.
  - That is what Adam was commanded to do when the LORD placed him in the Garden of Eden “...*to work it and keep it.*” (Gen. 2:15 ESV) and so, as his natural successors (in all things), that is what we should be doing now in the wider creation.
    - Although now, on account of sin's curse, our work has become toil, we remain obligated to serve the LORD; to be obedient to His commandments and His Holy Word even when we cannot do so perfectly.
    - Although we cannot perfectly obey God; and we cannot perfectly worship God; and we cannot perfectly serve Him, we will be considered to have done so because of Christ's perfect works (His active works of obedience) which are imputed to us as our own, along with His perfect righteousness.

Truly, our God is worthy to be praised for all of His mighty works and so therefore, we joyfully choose to worship Him.

Next, Zechariah's prophesy turns from directly blessing the LORD to foretelling the role which his son, John, would play in God's great work of salvation.

- Zechariah proclaims that John would be called “*the prophet of the Most High*”, a title and role which had not been rightly applied to anyone since Malachi, four hundred years prior. This clearly declares that there shall be a change in the status quo since the LORD always spoke through the prophets to call Israel to repentance and to declare oracles of woe upon the enemies of God's people.

- Zechariah proclaims that John would “...go before the Lord to prepare his ways...” thereby fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy, “*A voice cries: "In the wilderness **prepare the way of the LORD**; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*” (Isa. 40:3-5 ESV);
  - that John would do this by giving “...*knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins...*”; by proclaiming to them how their crippling moral debt could be wiped away by the LORD: that their sins would be utterly forgiven, in fact; that their moral balance would become “Zero” {even as Jesus and His Apostles would further proclaim have that “Zero” balance becomes a “net positive”}; that their relationship with the LORD would be reset; and that all of the spiritual barriers, their highs and lows (peaks and valleys), would be made smooth and make easy their access to God;
  - that John would do this by proclaiming **why** the LORD would do this, “...*because of the tender mercy of our God...*”; since the LORD is merciful and He is gracious because He has chosen for Himself a people, and because He has chosen to (condescend to) enter into covenant with us, and because He has chosen to save some of His creation, when He is obligated to save **none**.
  - that John would herald in the coming spiritual dawn, “...*whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*”; announcing the glorious appearance of what Malachi prophesied, “*But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.*” (Mal. 4:2 ESV); that when the Sun/Son rises, we shall all rejoice because then, according to the LORD's grace and mercy, we shall have peace.

Yet everything that Zechariah proclaimed about his son, John, was not merely about him but also about that “*horn of salvation*” coming from the “*house of David*”, Mary's Son-to-be, Jesus: the true “*sun of righteousness*”, the “*light of the world*”, and the revealed “*glory of the LORD*”. Everything that Zechariah prophesied here was really a declaration of divine Peace.

- Peace is the final, and only possible, ultimate outcome of the LORD's visitation because we know that “God wins”.
  - Our sinful rebellion against His Sovereignty will be ended, while all of God's enemies shall be defeated and they shall acknowledge Him as their LORD.
  - Our prior wickedness will be repented of, pardoned, and forgiven so that then, we shall serve Him in all holiness.
  - Our toils and troubles shall all cease when the curse of Adam's sin is lifted, for the “*offspring of the woman*” (Genesis 3:15), Jesus, has crushed the head of that ancient serpent, Satan, the first murderer {murdering Eve and Adam with his deception, prompting their original sin killing their soul and leading to their (eventual) physical demise} and the “*father of lies*” (John 8:44).
- Then, rejoicing and glorifying God shall be our ultimate response to the LORD's visitation.
  - We shall rejoice because we will know the extent of His forgiveness of our sin; we will know the full depth of our depravity and understand how great His mercy truly is.

- We shall rejoice because then we shall be able to obey His commandments completely; because obedience will be our earnest desire for we want the LORD to take pleasure in us.
- We shall glorify God in all that we do because then we shall do only that which is righteous and holy, just and merciful, gracious and wise.

Therefore, upon the birth of his son, John, Zechariah prophesied that the LORD would give us His peace and that therefore, we would rejoice and glorify Him. Ultimately, what Zechariah prophesied was the fulfillment of the Aaron blessing that has been spoken over every generation of Israel and the Church since Mount Sinai:

- *“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and **give you peace.**”* (Num. 6:24-26 ESV)

So finally, after seeing Zechariah's initial doubt and disbelief transformed into faith and joy, what lesson ought we to learn?

- Patience and peace.

Whenever a person first begins to read Scripture or even first hears the Gospel, their initial reaction is almost universally to believe that everything God demands and claims is utterly impossible and outrageous. Our initial reaction is to disbelieve and doubt it, because we do not want to; because if we did believe it, then it would prove that everything else we think about the way the world is and what we believe about ourselves are lies, because they are.

Upon first hearing the Gospel, our sinful hearts reject it, wanting it to not be true but, once the Holy Spirit gets a hold of us and opens our eyes to God's grace and mercy, then we see that the truth is reasonable, right, and absolutely necessary. Then we see that things are the way they must be because this is God's eternal plan, but we must be patient before we can see it because not everyone believes, or knows that they believe, immediately. Their faith must be confirmed.

Zechariah had to wait nine plus months before his initial lack of trust in Gabriel's proclamation was totally crushed, before his disbelief was proven wrong, and faith became sight. Although,

- I bet he began to second guess his initial response the moment he realized that he could not talk.
- I am sure that his faith began to grow once Elizabeth believed that she was pregnant.
- I am certain that he came to accept the truth after Mary came to visit them and then stayed.
- But, most certainly, without a doubt he knew, and he believed, and he finally understood the full weight of what Gabriel had told him, once he was able to speak again after writing, *“His name is John.”*

Zechariah was forced to be patient and his patience was rewarded. So too we must be patient with our faith, and with the growth of faith within our loved ones. We must trust that our patience will be rewarded, like Zechariah. It is very easy to become discouraged when we cannot see great progress towards or clear evidence of what we would wish, therefore we must watch and content ourselves with the smaller signs as they appear; taking comfort and finding encouragement in them, as we may.

- We may doubt our faith: what we believe and why we believe it; but if there was not a part of us that did believe, then we would not struggle with it.
- We may doubt our regeneration when we fall back into persistent sin, for a time.

- We may doubt our regeneration when we are plagued by wicked and blasphemous thoughts, ideas, or desires.
- We may doubt our sanctification because our language is not always pure and holy; sometimes we still say things that we ought not.
- We may doubt our sanctification because we still do not always do what is right, good, noble, charitable, kind, or most loving towards our neighbor; because sometimes we still hold grudges and feel vindictive against the wrongs and slights that have been done towards us, or which we have perceived as being done against us.
- We may doubt our sanctification because we often still prioritize the things of this world, and we still succumb to fear and worry over things that do not ultimately matter.

But the good news is, the relief about this is, the fact that we are still God's "work in progress". Therefore, we must each remain patient, and the only thing more difficult than being patient with yourself is being patient with God. The Apostle Peter tells us that "...with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." (2 Pet. 3:8 ESV), meaning that God does not experience time in the same way that we do; yet because we also know that "*The LORD is longsuffering...*" (Num. 14:18 KJV), we know that He has been and is far more patient with us than we deserve. So, cut yourself (and others) a little slack and do not worry or get upset because God does not act according to your plan or your timetable. His ways are not your ways, they are higher and better than you can possibly imagine (Isaiah 55:9).

Therefore, we must remain patient and we must trust in the LORD and in the promises which He has made because "*If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.*" (Hab. 2:3 ESV); because the LORD will and must keep His Word, otherwise He is not God (Hebrews 6:13-15).

So what if Zechariah only had to wait four hundred years between the most previous prophet and the birth of his son, and the first coming of the Messiah, while we have been waiting two thousand years for His return. Jesus Christ will come on the day and at the time of the LORD's choosing, no sooner and no later. Therefore, until then, we must be patient. We must trust to hope, waiting with faith in the expectant joy of eternal peace when Jesus Christ, the light of the world returns and the "*sun of righteousness rises with healing in its wings*" and all shall give glory and magnify the LORD.

**AMEN**