" Songs of Promise: Zechariah's Song"

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(Luke 1:5-25,67-80)

Introduction.

I want you to do a learning exercise with me this morning as we begin. Close your eyes and think back to a memory of a favorite Christmas. Picture a scene from your past which brought you great joy. Who are the people involved? Where are you? What are the colors, the smells, the sounds?

Now open your eyes and turn to your neighbor. Pair off together. Find out whose birthday is closest to today. When you've determined that, then the person whose birthday is closest to today, I want you to try and explain that favorite Christmas memory to your partner. But there's a catch – you can't use any words, and you can't say anything. Try and explain this favorite Christmas memory in another way – using your hands, drawing a picture, any way other than by speaking.

What was your experience like? How effective were you in explaining your Christmas memory? Pretty tough, isn't it? Now you know what Zechariah must have felt like when he tried to explain what had happened to him in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem when an angel of the Lord appeared to him.

I. The Story Behind the Song.

There's a story behind every song, and the story behind Zechariah's song of promise is an interesting one which involved a struggle with infertility, the feeling of shame and rejection, an encounter with an angel, and a miracle of God. In the passage Luke tells us that there was a couple named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth who were devout and righteous people. They weren't perfect; they were still sinners just like the rest of us. But they were earnest in trying to live a life pleasing to God, and they were diligent in observing all of the Lord's commandments in the Torah. The same phrase is used when the Bible describes Joseph, the father of Jesus, and Simeon, whose song we'll consider in a couple of weeks.

Luke also tells us that the couple was old, and they were childless because Elizabeth was unable to get pregnant. In those days, that wasn't just an unfortunate circumstance. It really was a reason for questioning the goodness of God in one's life. Luke intentionally puts together the part about them living blamelessly before the Lord along with not receiving a blessing from God. As a priest, everyone in the village where they lived would have talked about this. How could there be a man of God who isn't blessed with children? So Zechariah and Elizabeth carried around with them a sense of shame.

Zechariah was a Jewish priest. Every direct descendant of Aaron was automatically a priest in Israel, and that meant that for all intents and purposes there were far too many priests. At the time of David the priests were divided into 24 divisions who served in Jerusalem on a rotating basis, and Zechariah belonged to the division of Abijah. Only during Passover, Pentecost and at the Feast of Tabernacles did all the priests serve together. For the rest of the year, each division served two periods of one week each. Priests who loved their work looked forward to that week of service more than anything else, and it was the highlight of their year.

There were as many as 20,000 priests altogether in Israel at this time, so around 400 served each week at the Temple. All the duties were allocated by the casting of lots, or random choice, and to be chosen by lot to burn incense in the daily offering was considered a unique privilege. Only once in a lifetime was a priest allowed to receive this high honor. A priest might go their entire career and never have an opportunity to do it.

The priest would be accompanied by two assistants, and they proceed to the altar in the Court of the Priests next to the veil of the Temple which led to the Holy of Holies. One of the assistants carried a golden bowl containing the burning coals from the altar of the burnt offering, and he would spread them out on the altar of incense. Then he would withdraw. The other assistant carried the golden censer filled with incense, and he would arrange the aromatic substance upon the altar. He, too, would withdraw after completing his task.

Next came a moment of silence. Then a signal was given, and the priest would place the incense upon the coals, causing a cloud to rise. As the fragrant aroma rose, the priest said a prayer that consisted of thanksgiving for blessings received and a request for the peace of Israel. The people gathered outside the sanctuary, and they also prayed in a prostrate position and with outstretched hands. They would wait for the priest to return from the altar of incense and walk to the steps in front of the sanctuary. On these steps the priest, accompanied by other priests, would then pronounce the Aaronic blessing. And this benediction was then followed by songs of praise and public offerings by the people.

But on this day, the people waited. And they waited, and they waited, and they waited. For a long time Zechariah stayed at the altar of incense, and they all began to wonder what had happened to him. Little did they know of the amazing encounter he was having with an angel of the Lord, an encounter that would change his life forever.

When he did reappear, he couldn't speak. And there must have been a look of amazement in his eyes. It wasn't until nine months later when his son John the Baptist was born did he regain his ability to speak, and then they couldn't shut him up. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he praised God and prophesied regarding the goodness of the Lord and the promise this son held as a prophet in the future. Zechariah sang a song of promise, and he sang it loud and proud.

II. The Song of Zechariah.

Zechariah's song, which is sometimes referred to as *The Benedictus* (the Latin word for praise), has four main parts or stanzas which combine praise and prophecy. **First**, the song begins with a note of Thanksgiving, and it praises God for His deliverance through the coming Messiah (1:68).

Next, Zechariah sings about the amazing deliverance from all of Israel's enemies God is putting into play with His sovereign plan of salvation (1:69-75). The **third** section of the song could be called "That's my boy!" Here Zechariah wants to tell everyone the part his son will play in the preparation for the coming of the Messiah (1:76). **Finally,** the song concludes with God's salvation through mercy and light (1:77-79).

(SLIDE) Throughout this song of promise there is a striking use of a literary device called a *chiasmus* which uses an inversion of parallel literary structures to build the sentences. God's faithfulness to His covenant is central to the poem, and the song makes a connection between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and its Old Testament roots.

God keeps His promises, and what He says He will do. At just the right time in history, God put into motion the fulfillment of His promise to send a Redeemer who would save the world along with the people of Israel. In the Old Testament God said a forerunner would come to

prepare the way for the Messiah. He would be one who was like Elijah, the prophet of the Old Testament who was a mighty servant of God. And God did what He said He would do. He sent John the Baptist through this older couple who battled infertility.

A father's pride must have filled Zechariah's heart as he thought about the unique role his son would play in the drama of salvation history. When John grew up, he would be that prophet who would prepare the way of the Lord. "That's *my* boy!" Zechariah would sing. "God brought him into the world by a miracle, and he's gonna do great things. Yes, that's *my* boy! Thank you, Lord. I praise your holy Name!"

III. Insights from this Song of Promise.

This amazing story offers us insights into the grace of God and the purposes He has in the world, and I want you to notice a few of them. **First**, you can see *the sovereignty of God throughout the events of the story.* Zechariah was chosen by lot to burn the incense. Out of all the priests that week, he was the one selected at random for the job. And yet it was no accident. God was behind it all

The Lord arranges divine appointments all the time – chance meetings, unexpected letters, coincidences that defy reason. God has a plan for this world, and He has a plan for your life too. Don't be surprised when God shows up from out of nowhere in your life this Christmas.

Notice also *God's sovereignty in opening the womb of Elizabeth so that she conceived a child*, even in her older age. When hope was gone, when they had given up on their dream, God provided a wonderful blessing that was beyond Zechariah's capacity to believe. Our God is all-powerful, and He can do even the impossible. Have you given up on your dream? Are you facing an impossible situation? Do you have a hard time believing God? Then Zechariah's story and his song are for you, and they're for me.

The **third** insight I want you to notice is how *God shows up when people are just doing their jobs.* The angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah while he was performing the task of a priest burning the incense during the daily sacrifice. There was nothing special about this particular sacrifice. It was one of the normal sacrifices that were made twice a day at the temple. Sometimes God likes to show up when we are simply doing our jobs. We shouldn't be surprised that God wants to be a part of our work-a-day worlds, and it may just be His desire to use you in a special way in the coming week at your place of work, in your school, or in your neighborhood. Look for ways that God will show up where you live, work and play.

Finally, even when you're tempted to doubt God, *be careful not to respond with unbelief.* Zechariah had a hard time accepting the message Gabriel gave him that day, and he suffered the consequences for his lack of faith. God can open wombs, but He can also shut mouths. And we should be careful that when God tells us something - by an angel or simply in our reading of the Bible - that we take God at His word and respond with faith and action. It wasn't until Zechariah, in obedience to the angel's words, confirmed on a writing tablet that the boy's name indeed was to be John that his tongue was loosened. And then he made up for lost time and the 9+ months he had been silenced. They couldn't shut him up!

Conclusion.

As we close this morning, let me ask - are you only looking for God in the spectacular this Christmas, or are you open to see Him work in the ordinary things of your life? Have you developed an eye of faith to see the fingerprints of God on your daily world?

Let me also ask, do you look to God and His sovereignty to provide for your needs, even in those times of significant disappointment and loss? Perhaps you yourself struggle with infertility, or you've lost a job, or a child has left home, or a loved one has died. Maybe you're facing significant financial stress with the coming holidays. Is God big enough to deal with your problem? Are you trusting in Him to see you through? Have faith. He is the sovereign God of the universe, and you are His beloved child.

The painting on the screens was done by Jane Dodds of our congregation for this Sunday in Advent. It is a painting of Zechariah and Elizabeth with their son John. There is a description of the painting on the back of the bulletin.

The name Zechariah comes from the Hebrew word *zakar,* which means "to remember." So the name Zechariah literally means "Remember the Lord".

A number of years ago a Presbyterian pastor I knew took a trip to Seoul, South Korea. While he was there, he visited the largest Presbyterian congregation in the world – the Young Nak Presbyterian Church, which at that time it had over 60,000 members. The pastor of that church for many years was a Dr. Han, so this pastor friend of mine went to visit the aging Dr. Han. The man had been through a difficult year health-wise, and he had been unconscious for over a month at one point.

When the two men met together, Dr. Han described his long convalescence. And then he said a sentence I'll never forget. He said, *"I have forgotten things I should have remembered, and I have remembered things I should have forgotten."* It seems that when he was unconscious somehow his mind was erased of important spiritual truths like the words to hymns and the words of Scripture – things he should have remembered. Sadly, he was able to remember things like fears, doubts, and sin from earlier in his life he wanted to forget. Dr. Han was in the process of relearning those important spiritual truths he wanted to remember. When the old man was asked which hymn he wanted to relearn first, he said, "Jesus Loves Me This I Know."

What have you forgotten that you need to remember about God's love for you today? And what do you remember you need to forget? One of the best ways to remember what is more important during the season of Advent is by coming to the Lord's Table and remembering the reason for Christ's appearing in the first place. He came to die for our sins and redeem our broken lives. As we come to the celebration of Communion, let's think on these things and prepare our hearts for this Advent when we celebrate the Songs of Promise. Amen.