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LUKE 1:5-25

9th Message

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HOPE FULFILLED

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Early December is a time of year in my family for many traditions. When our kids were much younger, we would travel into the mountains and cut down a Christmas tree at the tree farm. We would also take our kids to see Santa. Once they were on his lap, Santa would always ask, "What are you hoping for this Christmas?" As parents we paid close attention so that we could remember the long list of toys being requested.

Christmas is a time of hopeful expectations: hope for nice presents, the latest gadgets, hope for family to get along better, hope for that end-of-year bonus, hope not to gain 10 pounds over the holiday season. It is a good time to pause for a moment and ask the question, What are you hoping for? What will bring you joy? Where are you placing your hope?

Our text this morning places us into the heart of Israel when they were wondering if their hope would ever be fulfilled, if God would ever keep his promise. God promised that he would send a Messiah-King to deliver and restore Israel, and before the king would arrive, there would be a prophetic forerunner who would prepare the way. In Isaiah there is promised, "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.'" (Isa. 40:3).

We hear a similar refrain from the Lord through the prophet Malachi, promising to wayward Israel that he will send a messenger "who will prepare the way before me" (Mal 3:1), and will be like a "refiner's fire" (Mal. 3:2) distinguishing for them what it means to be righteous and what it means to be wicked. The last words in the book of Malachi, and the last words from God to Israel in the Old Testament urge Israel to watch and wait for this new prophetic voice:

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction." (Malachi 4:4-6)

It must have been hard for the people of Israel to understand what was going on. Has God forgotten us? Has God's plan of salvation broken down? Has God failed? Is he not one who keeps his word? Is our situation hopeless?

The people of God were waiting for God to fulfill his promise to send not only a Davidic king that would set all things right, but also a prophet like Elijah to proceed the king and prepare the people for his coming. Who will this forerunner be? After 400 years of waiting, they will finally have their answer.

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. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no

children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years. (Luke 1:5-7)

Jesus was born into a world that was ruled by the government of Rome. The Romans set Herod as king over the people of Judea. Herod was a real piece of work. As one commentator put it, "Herod was a ruthless fighter, a cunning negotiator, and a subtle diplomat. He was a heathen in practice and a monster in character. He was supremely suspicious and cruel, putting to death many of the Jews who opposed his government."¹

In the midst of this spiritually dark time, Luke introduces us to a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, both of honorable priestly origin. Despite their excellent pedigree and righteous character, they had no children and no hope for children because Elizabeth was barren and they were both already getting the Senior Citizen discount. In the ancient near east at that time, children gave a woman her standing in the community. Hopelessness, heartache and deep disappointment would have been part of Zechariah and Elizabeth's daily experience. Barrenness was commonly seen as a sign of God's judgment so Elizabeth would have been exposed to ostracism, humiliation and the worst kind of gossip.

Luke tells us however that Elizabeth's barrenness was not in any way due to God's displeasure with them because, "*Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.*" Zechariah and Elizabeth were a righteous and faithful couple. Their obedience and devotion to God was a beautiful thing in his eyes. In a land of darkness, they lived in a way that was pleasing to God.

It is with this humble and needy couple that God continues his good work:

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. (Luke 1:8-10)

The Lord had appointed the sons of Aaron to be the priests of Israel and to serve him and his people in the temple. There were so many descendants of Aaron that they were divided into groups, and each group or division served in the temple two weeks each year. It is during one of these times that Zechariah, by the casting of lots, received the honor and privilege of going into the inner court and offering incense on the coals of the altar. As Zechariah was praying, a multitude of worshippers would have gathered outside the temple, offering their prayers as well. When Zechariah placed the incense on the altar, he would pray on behalf of the people for the restoration and deliverance of Israel. As the incense burned the smoke would rise symbolizing the prayers of Israel rising to God.

It is in this holy moment of worship and prayer that God sends his messenger.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 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. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 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. 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.” Luke 1:11-17

As Zechariah places the incense on the altar and offers up his prayer, an angel appears to him. As you might expect, the sudden appearance of the angel produces a certain panic in Zechariah. To calm him, the angel Gabriel assures Zechariah that he has no need to fear for he brings good news; “your prayer has been answered.”

At first Zechariah must have wondered which prayer has been heard? Is it my decades-long prayer for a son or my prayer for the people of Israel? Is it possible, hope beyond all hope, that both prayers could be answered? The answer is a resounding yes. Elizabeth will bear a son, and not only will he be a joy and delight to you, but many will rejoice because of him. John’s birth signals that God is again at work to fulfill his promise to save his people and bless all the nations. John will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will play a significant role in God’s ongoing plan of salvation. Just as God promised through the prophets Isaiah and Malachi, John will be the forerunner who will “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Everything about the description of John harkens back to the great prophets of the Old Testament. Like Israel’s first prophet Samuel, especially consecrated to the Lord, John will abstain from intoxicating drink. Like Elijah, John will powerfully call the nation to repent and to reform – to turn back to God and live righteously, turning “the hearts of the fathers to their children” and turning from disobedience to live out “the wisdom of the righteous.” The angel Gabriel makes it clear that there will be an escalation of God’s work in and through John, for unlike the other prophets he will be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. John will be a prophet like no other.

All this is an amazing announcement and promise. How will Zechariah respond?

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 1:18). As a student of the Hebrew scriptures, Zechariah would know very well that barren women and old couples do indeed have children when God intervenes; Abraham and Sarah bore Isaac, Jacob and Rachel bore Joseph, and Elkanah and Hannah bore Samuel. But when it comes to his own situation, instead of believing and rejoicing in what the Lord has promised to do, Zechariah responds with skepticism and disbelief. “Our problem is too big. We are simply too old. Besides, how can I be sure I can believe you? How can I be sure I can trust you and your message? I need proof. Give me a sign.” How will the angel respond to that?

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. 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.” (Luke 1:19-20)

Most of the classic and modern paintings of angels depict them as very meek and mild, kind of like Woody Allen. But I just don’t see Gabriel that way. I see him more robust and confident, kind of like Tim Tebow, kind and gentle, but powerful and strong, looking at Zechariah with loving and penetrating eyes and giving him the assurance he needs to grow in faith.

“Let me tell you a little bit about who I am. My name is Gabriel. Yes, *that* Gabriel, the one you read about all the time in your Hebrew scriptures who was sent by God to the prophet Daniel. That’s me, and I stand in the throne room of Heaven in the presence of God. I am his trusted messenger, and when he has big news to share he sends me. He has really big news for you Zechariah, and it is really good, so he sent me to share it with you. You will be given a sign, but it will not be the kind of sign you were expecting. Because you did not believe my words you will be mute until the day John is born.”

Zechariah’s forced silence serves multiple functions. It will serve as a constant reminder to him of God’s sovereignty and power, as well as create space within his world for his faith and trust to grow as he must be quiet for several months and watch God work. It is important to note that Zechariah’s moment of unbelief does not disqualify him from his special part in God’s saving work. God did not throw Zechariah away onto the trash heap of human history and use some other “more faithful” man to accomplish his plan. God is so gracious.

As the drama intensified inside the temple, there was drama building outside as well.

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 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. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. (Luke 1:21-23)

The longer it took Zechariah to come out of the Holy Place, the greater the puzzlement of the assembly outside. When he finally emerges and is unable to give the customary blessing to the gathered crowd, Zechariah uses a variety of gestures to try and explain what has just happened to him inside. That would have been a sight to see. What I wouldn’t give to have been there to see Zechariah try and pantomime all that he had just experienced. If it weren’t so awe inspiring, it would be comical. It is unlikely they could piece together everything he was trying to tell them, but one thing they knew for sure was that Zechariah had received an appearance from heaven inside the temple.

When Zechariah fulfilled his two weeks of temple duty, he left Jerusalem. On his journey home he must have been reflecting not only on all that God had promised to do, but also, “How am I going to explain this to Elizabeth when I walk through the front door?” What has been a very dramatic story thus far ends just as powerfully but quite softly.

After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. “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.” (Luke 1:24-25)

There is no fanfare; just a simple declaration that what the angel had promised comes to pass. Elizabeth becomes pregnant and though her conception was in the normal manner, it was nevertheless miraculous due to her barrenness and old age. We are not told why she secluded herself, but what we do know for sure is that Elizabeth is delighted and joyful, just as the angel said she would be. She gives God all the credit and takes his action very personally; “The Lord has done this for me. He has shown me favor by giving me this child and removing my disgrace in the community.” Her prayers have been answered. Her hope is fulfilled.

And what about Zechariah? He had a front row seat to all that God was doing. His time of silence and observation accomplished its purpose. After John was born and he was able to speak again, the first words out of his mouth are a beautiful, joyful, and prophetic prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord for all he has done and all he will do.

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people... And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God...” (Luke 1:68, 76-78a)

Zechariah too is full of joy and delight. His doubt became trust. He experienced God’s mercy and faithfulness first-hand. His unbelief became belief. What an amazing series of events. In this story we see how God is at work, as he always is, on multiple levels. He fulfilled the hope of Israel, and he also fulfilled the hopes of Zechariah and Elizabeth. God made a promise to his people to send a forerunner to prepare the way for the Messiah, and he did by intervening in the life of Zechariah and Elizabeth. They are an integral part of God’s great story of redemption for the world. God chose a special role for Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John. He has a role for you and me too. The high drama of God’s ongoing work of salvation includes us. Your story is an important part of the Great Story. Do you feel important? If not, you must remember that as a child of God you are not, and never will be, forgotten, over-looked, discounted, or ignored by your Heavenly Father. We do not have insignificant bit parts relegated to the far sides of the stage. As believers in Christ, the Holy Spirit dwells within us, so we are salt and light. We are his ambassadors and witnesses, with the great privilege and high calling of sharing his love and extending his invitation to all the world.

As with the nation of Israel, as well as Zechariah and Elizabeth, there may be long periods of time when God seems absent or inactive in our life, but we must not interpret that as God’s displeasure with us. We must remember that God is accomplishing his good work in and through us even when circumstances suggest otherwise. As a matter of fact, our difficult circumstances, the things we hope will go away, may provide the perfect conditions in which our faith will grow.

I agree with Richard Hendrix: “Second only to suffering, waiting may be the greatest teacher and trainer in godliness, maturity, and genuine spirituality most of us ever encounter.” Are you currently going through something that makes it difficult for you to trust God, to wait upon him and his timing? Are you doubting God’s desire to provide for you the very best? Let me remind you that our Heavenly Father, “In his great mercy ... has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3-4). In Christ, God has blessed us so richly.

We worship a God who not only hears our prayers, but who in his mercy, according to his will and timing, answers our prayers. Does this mean that God will provide us with a child if we are barren, or a job if we are unemployed, or recovery if we are sick? No. God does not promise us those things. But what he does promise us, in full measure, is the one thing that will truly satisfy our greatest thirst and our deepest hope: himself.

And so, at the beginning of this Christmas season and first Sunday of Advent, the question remains, Where is your hope? Where are you placing your trust? Is it on the things of this world that come and go, that never truly satisfy, or is your hope in the Lord and his loving presence that will never fade away? Our God keeps his promises. He has fulfilled them in the past, and he will fulfill them in the future. Our hope is secure. He is our joy and delight.

Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for us is evidence that God knows our whole story and loves us. He knows our sin and virtue, our fears and our love, our anguish and our hope. He knows every thing about us. Nothing in us is hidden from him, and yet he does not move away from us. He comes toward us granting us his unconditional love and life through his Son Jesus Christ.

There is no greater hope fulfilled than that.

1. Dr. Kelley Varner, *Moses, the Master, and the Manchild: Every 2,000 Years God Has a Son*, (Destiny Image Publishers, Shippensburg, PA, 2001), 36.

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