



## LIFE BIRTHED IN BARRENNESS

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Luke 1:5-25

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Christmas is a magical season. This is the time when we unearth the boxes that store the stockings, decorations and lights. We make hot chocolate and pile into the car, excited at the prospect of cutting down our own Christmas tree. We gather around the television to watch Bing Crosby in *White Christmas* or Jimmy Stewart in *It's A Wonderful Life*. Our kitchens are filled with the aroma of baked cookies and candies. We exercise our vocal chords, preparing to sing Handel's *Messiah*. With feelings of either excitement or trepidation, we anticipate spending the holidays with our families.

A year ago this very weekend, my wife Liz and I attended the Radio City Music Hall Christmas Spectacular in New York City. We sat in absolute amazement and wonder at the magic of that production.

It's easy to see why Christmas is the favorite time of year for many. Their holidays are filled with joy and happiness; all is well with their world. But for others, Christmas is the least favorite season. It is a time of great loneliness, sadness and unfulfilled expectations.

Because of the events of September 11th, the mood this Christmas will no doubt be very different. But, no matter what we think of Christmas, no matter what our past experiences of the season have been, no matter what is happening in the world, there is something very special and unique about this time of year. It is a time both to cry and laugh, to sing and celebrate.

Whether we know it or not, the emotions that we feel at Christmas have their source in God. In the birth of Jesus, God came to earth to bring the gift of redemption to mankind. Christmas evokes these longings in all of us. The show that my wife and I saw in New York was indeed magical. But what made it really memorable was the nativity scene at the end. Right there in the heart of New York City, the story of the birth of Jesus was portrayed by actors and live animals onstage. Christmas songs were sung, the scripture was read, and the coming of Christ was proclaimed. It was a very moving time.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent, the season when we prepare our hearts for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. To help us prepare, over these three Sundays we will be looking at the opening two chapters of Luke's gospel. These texts relate the birth narratives of the servant of God and the Son of God. Here is where the birth of John and Jesus are foretold and realized.

The two stories bear some striking similarities. In both cases, the angel Gabriel brings news of what was about to happen; in both the circumstances of the birth and circumcision are narrated; and both are followed by prophetic utterances. Between the prophecies and the births, Mary visits Elizabeth, and the text resounds with the beautiful song of Mary.

This morning we will focus on the prophecy of John's birth, from Luke 1:5-25.

**In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years. (Luke 1:5-7, NASB)**

The story opens with a description of a couple living in Judah toward the end of Herod's reign (37-4 BC). One commentator says that it begins like a fairy tale: "once upon a time there were two old people, a man and his wife..."

Zacharias is a priest, and his wife Elizabeth is the daughter of a priest, from among the daughters of Aaron. Marrying a woman from a priestly family would not have been a requirement for Zacharias, but it would have been a special blessing for him. We read that they were both righteous: they walked blamelessly by keeping all the commandments and the laws of God. This doesn't mean they were sinless, but that they were faithful in serving God and were without guilt in that relationship.

The couple had no children; Elizabeth was barren. And they were beyond hope of ever having offspring, since both were advanced in years. This would have been a social disgrace and a source of great sorrow for Elizabeth. Her barrenness would likely be associated with sinfulness.

Right away the text reveals this tension: the couple's barrenness is set in contrast to their piety. Because of their faithful service they would have expected to be blessed by children. They had done everything right, but for them there was no blessing, only pain and sorrow.

Bible students would have their interest aroused by this mention of a barren woman. But we should not be

surprised that the gospel story begins with a childless couple. The story of Israel began in the same way, with Abraham and Sarah.

The Old Testament records the stories of five barren women: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Manoah's wife (we do not know her name), and Hannah. Each of these women would eventually give birth to son of great significance in the redemption story. Elizabeth now becomes the sixth such woman in the Bible.

And soon we will be introduced to a seventh woman (seven being the number of perfection). This one is not barren, however; she is a virgin. The mention of a barren woman heightens our anticipation that something or someone is coming, because the state of barrenness is connected to the redemption story and the promised seed.

**Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. (1:8-10)**

The priests were divided into twenty-four divisions, each of which served twice a year in the temple, for a period of one week. There were not enough sacred duties to occupy all the priests, so lots were cast to see who would perform each function.

The incense offering was made twice daily, in the holy place of the temple, to symbolize and express prayer. The chosen priest would go into the holy place with the other priests; then they would retire, leaving him alone. When the signal was given, he would offer the incense.

Worshippers waited in the outer court until the priest had discharged his duty and dismissed them with a benediction. The offering of incense was regarded as a great privilege. A priest could not do this more than once in his lifetime, and some priests never had that privilege. When Zacharias performed this task, it was the most important moment in his life.

**And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the LORD their God. It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so**

**as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (1:11-17)**

An angel appears to Zacharias at the altar of incense. This had not happened in Israel in a long time. At first, Zacharias is scared out of his wits. He is troubled and frightened at the sight of the angel. But the angel reassures him, telling him not to fear. He informs Zacharias that his prayer had been answered and he and Elizabeth will have a son.

The prayer referred to is likely the prayer that Zacharias said as he presented the incense offering. Did he petition for a son? On this occasion it is unlikely that he would have made his private concern the subject of his prayer. In any event, Zacharias and Elizabeth were too old. No, Zacharias prayed for the redemption of Israel. His prayer would be answered in a most amazing way, and his own son would have a role in bringing about that redemption.

The angel tells Zacharias several things about his promised son. He would be called John, which means, "the Lord is gracious." Usually it was the father's duty to name his child. God's taking over this task was a sign that he was making the child his responsibility.

Second, this son would bring great joy and gladness to many. Third, he would be considered great before the Lord. John would be the greatest person of his generation. He was the one of whom Jesus said, "I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John" (Luke 7:28).

Fourth, like Samuel, this one would be dedicated to the Lord. He would not drink any wine or strong drink. Fifth, he would be empowered by the Holy Spirit from the beginning. The Spirit began to stir in Samson following his birth, but he was with John from the womb.

Sixth, he would have a very significant and special destiny: he would turn the sons of Israel to the Lord; he would fulfill the role of Elijah and the prophecy of Malachi; he would prepare the way for the coming of God. Zacharias would prophecy concerning him,

**"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;**

**For you will go on BEFORE THE LORD TO PREPARE HIS WAYS; To give to His people the knowledge of salvation By the forgiveness of their sins." (Luke 1:76-77)**

John would accomplish what the Old Testament prophets could not.

Zacharias said to the angel, "How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years." (1:18)

Zacharias responds with unbelief to this announcement by the angel. Amazingly, his response is very similar to Abraham's centuries earlier. In Genesis 15, Abraham asks God, referring to the land, "How shall I know that I shall possess it?" Abraham laughed when God told him that he and Sarah would have a son (Gen 17).

Zacharias, in effect, is requesting a sign from the angel, in the same way that Gideon had asked for a sign.

**The angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time." (1:19-20)**

Gabriel discloses his name very emphatically. He tells Zacharias that if he wants a sign, then he shall have it, only it won't be what he thinks. Zacharias will be silent, unable to speak until Gabriel's words are fulfilled. He will not be able to speak again until the birth of John and he is able to confirm the name of his son.

**The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple. But 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. (1:21-22)**

Zacharias comes out of the temple and the people are waiting for a benediction, but they do not hear any. They surmise that something unspeakable has taken place.

**When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home. After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men." (1:23-25)**

Apparently Zacharias remained in Jerusalem that week. When the couple returned to their home, Elizabeth conceived. It is not clear why she stayed in seclusion. But, since her pregnancy would not have shown yet, perhaps she did not want to be seen in public until it was obvious that the Lord had taken away her reproach. It would not be long before she was delivered from disgrace.

John is the one who helps us prepare in this season of Advent. He is the one who cried in the wilderness, "Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God."

The account instructs us that unless God supernaturally breaks into the human story, we will remain barren, no matter how well or how piously we behave. The good news of the coming of the Savior emphatically declares that life can be birthed in barrenness. Elizabeth was barren, Israel was barren, indeed we are barren. But God is not.

The emotion that we feel at Christmas signifies our longing for redemption, for something to be birthed in us. We offer our incense and pray, and God hears us. He gave birth to two sons, one to prepare and one to fulfill. The birth of the first to a barren woman prepares us for the miraculous birth of the second.

Everything about the birth narratives is supernatural. Every detail is marked by the presence of the Holy Spirit. John is filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in the womb (verse 15); the Holy Spirit came upon Mary with power (35); when Mary greeted Elizabeth, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit (41); when John was born, Zacharias prophesied, filled with the Holy Spirit (67). Everything about the text reveals that God broke through barrenness. And he breaks through our barrenness too.

Reflecting on this text I was reminded of another Elizabeth—my own wife. I certainly am not comparing my wife and me to the pious couple that we read about in the text. But one thing I know for certain is that my wife is filled with the Holy Spirit. God speaks to her in amazing ways. In fact, her coming to Christ was accompanied by a vision.

When I met Liz, her home was very dark and barren. The same was true of her mother's heart. But the life and light in my wife was a light that one day would shine in the darkness of her mother's heart. Liz was the "voice crying in the wilderness."

In Christmas of 1981, twenty years ago, our family went to Colorado for the holidays. Liz's mother was alone, and she sensed her barrenness as never before. In her pain she prayed to God for redemption, and God heard her prayer and entered in. Her barrenness had prepared her for Advent.

Let us reflect on our own barrenness today, on our inability bring life into our being. Many here this morning can identify with this.

We are barren physically. Like Zacharias and Elizabeth, we have trouble conceiving children. We feel unblest and unloved.

We are barren emotionally. Our souls are filled with sadness and disappointment. We are depressed. As was the case with Elizabeth, people mistakenly attribute this to our sinfulness.

We are barren spiritually. We wonder where is God. We long for his voice and his presence. We work hard to please him, but nothing brings the result we long for.

We feel barren because we are out of work. A sense of uselessness overwhelms us. We feel barren in our marriage. We long for joy and intimacy. We feel barren because of disease or illness that attacks our body and our hope for life.

The story of Zacharias and Elizabeth proclaims that we don't need to be afraid of our barrenness. We don't need to conceal it. We don't need to fill our life with things and people to take the barrenness away. We cannot ensure God's blessing through our own piety, nor should we ever attempt to do so. We prepare for Christmas and for God's great breakthrough by acknowledging, accepting, and even embracing our barrenness. God has come and God will come and give birth supernaturally, by his Holy Spirit, in our barrenness.

In her book *Waiting for God*, Simone Weil writes:

There are people who try to raise their souls like a man continually taking standing jumps in the hopes that, if he jumps higher every day, a time may come when he will no longer fall back but will go right up to the sky. Thus occupied he cannot look at the sky. We cannot take a single step toward heaven. It is not in our power to travel in a vertical direction. If however we look heavenward for a long time, God comes and takes us up. He raises us easily.

We are barren, but God is not. During Advent, let us worship and praise him for the way he has broken through our barrenness to birth new life.

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