

THE STORY OF ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH

Luke 1:5-23, 57-80, Isaiah 40:3-5, Malachi 4:5

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Years ago when our children were little we always drove home for Christmas. We would pack up the car, put Joy and Tim in their car seats and head down the road from western North Carolina to Hampton Roads, Virginia. It was an opportunity for the grandparents to spend time with their grandchildren and for all of us to enjoy the Christmas season together. There was just one problem. It took a long time, about 6 or 7 hours of driving, to get there. Just before one of these holiday excursions Sherry asked our little daughter Joy, "Aren't you excited about going to see grandma and granddaddy?" "Mommy," she said, "It's going to be a long journey."

Yes, sometimes journeys are long. They can take an extended period of time with lots of twists and turns along the way. That was certainly true with regards to the birth of Christ. A number of people were caught up in a sequence of events that occurred before that little baby was born in Bethlehem. For some, like Mary and Joseph, it actually involved a long and a difficult journey, over a hundred miles probably on foot, all the way from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. This December we will join with them and all of the others who were a part of that first Christmas so long ago. We will discover what they experienced and how God changed their lives as recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. We will also have an opportunity to learn a little more about the events and times in which they lived. Finally, we will discover how a number of Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled when God sent His Son into our world. So let's get started on our own journey to Christmas. It will be an exciting adventure. The first people we're going to meet during this journey is a senior adult couple by the name of Zechariah and Elizabeth. They are getting ready to enter the temple in Jerusalem. Let me introduce them to you.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were an older couple. They have been happily married for many years, but without the blessing of children. This had become one of the great disappointments of their life together. The Scriptures clearly taught that children were like the arrows of a warrior. Blessed was the man whose quiver was full of them (Psalm 127:3-5). Unfortunately Zechariah's quiver was empty. Nevertheless, Zachariah and Elizabeth had been true to the Lord. They had been careful to keep all of the laws and commandments that God had given to His people. Recently they had even been blessed with a great honor. Zechariah had been chosen to burn incense in the temple at Jerusalem. He was a priest from the tribe of Levi. In fact, both he and Elizabeth could trace their heritage back to this tribe, the one that had been chosen by God to lead the Jewish people in worship. In a few moments Zechariah would be entering the Holy Place, the outer room of the temple. It contained the Menorah, the seven branched lamp stand that was always lit. It represented God's continuing presence and watch care His people. This outer room of the temple also housed

the Table of Shew Bread on which twelve loaves of bread were placed, a symbolic gift to God from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Finally there was the small altar. It was the place where Zechariah would burn incense, representing the prayers of God's people being offered unto the Lord. Only a few priests were entrusted with this special responsibility. They were chosen by lot, a way that ensured that their selection was from God, not man. Elizabeth was thrilled that her husband had been selected. She and a gathering of friends waited outside the temple as Zechariah entered the building by himself. Gently swinging a censor to keep the smoldering incense aglow, he would pour its contents on the altar. Then he would offer the prayers of God's people as the smoke of the burning incense gradually wafted skyward. This day, however, something far different was about to take place.

As he was preparing to pour the incense on the altar, suddenly a tall, strong young man was standing in front of him. He was so startled that he dropped the censor and fell to his knees. The man spoke in a voice that clearly indicated that he had come from a heavenly realm. The man said, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, your prayer has been answered. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to name him 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 drink wine or any other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will be brought back to the Lord their God because of him. He will go forth in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to righteousness, to make ready a people prepared to meet the Lord." Zechariah could not believe what he was hearing. He asked this angelic being, "How can this be? How can I know that what you say will take place? I'm an old man and my wife is well advanced in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you the good news. However, because you do not believe what I have told you, you will be silent from this moment until the day when what I have said comes true" (Luke 1:11-20).

Meanwhile, the people waiting outside wondered what had happened to Zechariah. He had been gone a long time. When he finally stumbled out of the temple, everyone knew that something had happened. Zechariah couldn't speak, not even a whisper. It was obvious to all that he had seen a vision. After he fulfilled his duties at the temple, he and Elizabeth returned home and guess what happened? Elizabeth became pregnant and she was thrilled by what the Lord had done for her. Nine months later she gave birth to a healthy little boy, just as the angel had promised. On the eighth day after his birth, the time had come to name the child. Everyone was surprised that the couple had decided to name their baby "John," a name which means "God is gracious." Usually a child was named after his father or some other close relative, but there was no one in the family named "John". So they asked Zechariah, "What's the boy to be named?" Zechariah took a writing tablet and wrote on it, "His name is John!" Immediately his tongue was loosened and he began to praise the Lord. Then taking the little child in his arms he said, "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on

before the Lord to prepare a way for him, to give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins." (Luke 1:57-80)

And so it was. John grew up, a man strong in spirit, a prophetic voice crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." Living in the desert, he was like the prophet Elijah, calling people to repentance and baptizing them in the Jordan River. Thus was fulfilled two key passages of Scripture in the Old Testament, passages of Scripture which foretold how John would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, the Son of God. Isaiah had written centuries earlier, *"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, 'Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain; and the glory of the LORD shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it'"* (Isaiah 40:3-5). Then at the very end of the Old Testament, there is this further confirmation of what the Lord was preparing to accomplish, a prophetic proclamation written by the prophet Malachi, *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and dreadful day of the LORD."* (Malachi 4:5) So you see, God had taken an older couple, blessed them with a son and included them in His plans to redeem all of mankind. John, their son, would prepare the way, even from before his birth, for the arrival of God's salvation.

So what have we learned on this first Sunday of Advent as we begin our journey to Christmas? What have been able to discern from our encounter with Zachariah and Elizabeth that we can apply to our own lives? First, you're never too old to serve the Lord. Zachariah and Elizabeth were both in the latter years of their lives. They had every right to stay home and say, "We're just too old and tired to participate in religious ceremonies any more. Why just climbing those steps into the temple is way too hard on knees that don't like to bend anymore." But that's not what they said or did. Zechariah was eager to fulfill his sacred duty as a servant of the Lord and he had the full support of his wife. All too often in today's world older folks are consigned to the retirement syndrome. We are gently told to back away from being fully engaged in life, even with regards to our participation at church. We are encouraged to step aside and let the younger folks take over. Sometimes we even adopt that attitude ourselves. Nothing could be further from the truth. I've seen older folks do some mighty impressive things, like my aunt Tootsie, who was confined to a wheel chair. Even though she was in her eighties, she hosted a "Good Morning Devotional" every day on the intercom at the nursing home where she was a resident. We must never let people put us on a shelf, no matter how old we are. God can still use us. Moses was eighty years old when he led the children of Israel out of Egypt. That's pretty good for an octogenarian and he kept right on going until he was 120.

Here's the second thing that we can learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth, especially Zechariah. We should never let the power of disbelief hold sway over our lives. Now Zechariah never had any doubts about the Lord. He believed in God with all of his heart. Otherwise, he would not have gone to the temple to burn incense. His problem was that he just did not believe that God was going to do something

special through him and Elizabeth, like giving them a son. He knew that God had performed miracles in the past. The Bible was full of them, like the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. He had just stopped believing that God could do something like that in his life. Maybe he thought he just wasn't good enough to be the recipient of such a blessing. Who knows? In any case, He had decided that he and Elizabeth were just too old. The opportunity to be parents had come and gone. How wrong he had been. His unwillingness to believe that God had something special in store for him and Elizabeth was a costly mistake. It had hushed him up for nearly a year. The same thing can happen to us when we stop believing that God can move and work through our lives. It can shut us up and destroy all the joy and happiness which the Lord desires to bestow upon us.

Don't let that happen to you. During your journey to Christmas this year, don't let a spirit of disbelief diminish your joyous expectation that the Lord is still present and able to do wonderful things in the lives of His people, even those who are getting a bit older. Always remember that with God all things are possible—for you, for me and for all of those who have entrusted their lives into His care.