

'Twas the Year before Christmas

December 2017

Luke 1:5-25

Good morning sisters and brothers!

When Pastor Jerry asked me if I'd consider doing a sermon on a character from the Christmas story, I immediately had two nontraditional characters in mind. In my 40 plus years as a follower of Jesus, I cannot recall ever hearing about Zechariah and Elizabeth from the pulpit before. So, I asked if it would be acceptable to focus on this old but very cool couple from Luke chapter 1. Pastor Jerry agreed, so did I, and I have to tell you it's simply amazing how the time has flown by. I am here ready to share, and there you all are sitting with eager anticipation!

Now I imagine that some of you are wondering just how these characters fit into our Christmas story. You may be thinking, I can understand focusing on the Shepherds, the Magi, or the angels; and of course there's no question about focusing on Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. But this nice old couple? Come on, Scott, what do they have to do with our Christmas story? To answer that question, with some editing help from my beloved, I have written a poem about our story today, to help you get an idea of my thinking. So I invite you to sit back and listen to: **'Twas the Year before Christmas**

'Twas the Year before Christmas

'Twas the year before Christmas, and all through the land,
hope stirred that the coming of Messiah was at hand;
Hope that the God of Israel would soon show his power,
that salvation from their enemies would come any hour.

We first see a priest and his bride of many years,
serving God faithfully, yet with many tears.
For, you see, they had no little ones to take care.
yet to God they came daily, asking to hear their prayer.

With hopes of a child now only a passing thought,
there still remained hope for the people God sought;
So they hoped, and prayed, and served faithful and true,
When suddenly, surprising! an angel came out of the blue.

There was fear and trembling as the angel spoke,
And questions and joy did his message evoke.
A lesson this faithful priest needed to learn:
to listen to his God, no matter what, at each turn.

So really it is here that everything started,
And our Christmas story begins to be imparted.
A glimmer of hope breaking, as the prophets foretold,
for God's plan finally—finally!—begins to unfold.

Scott & Laura Engelstad
2017

Did you hear it? Does that make sense? Can you feel a little of the tension and emotion of this point in history? This is really an exciting time!

This morning as we explore this passage from Luke's Gospel, I have three goals.

Our **first** goal is to think about why this story was added by Luke. Just what is his purpose?

The **second** goal is for us to get to know this nice old couple better. Seniors are some of the nicest people!

And our **final** goal is to learn something new from the story, and get a fresh perspective as we look at this year before Christmas.

Why this story?

So let's begin with the question, why this story? Why did Luke add this when no other gospel includes it? What is he trying to tell his reader? Look at how Luke opens his Gospel account. In his introduction, verses 3 & 4, he tells us:

"... since I myself have carefully investigated everything **from the beginning**. I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things **you have been taught**." Luke 1:3-4

There are two concepts in these verses. The first is this idea that Luke has investigated everything from the beginning. This is intriguing to me. Could it be to Luke that this is where the "good news" begins? Is this where God re-enters human history and his Christmas plans begin to unfold?

A second reason for adding this account centers around Theophilus, the individual to whom Luke writes. Luke tells us Theophilus has been taught certain things, and it is reasonable to conclude that this narrative section was included to confirm that what he had learned was indeed true. So we see a beginning to God's "good news, a confirmation of Theophilus' education, and there is also another hint about Luke's purpose as we hear echoes from the OT throughout this story. Consider one of these echoes from the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, as we read in chapter 4:5-6

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. **He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents**; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."

Malachi 4:5-6

As the drama of the Old Testament closes, with corruption in the priesthood and unfaithfulness in the land, the curtain descends with these final words from God. It is as though we have come to an intermission or a season-ending cliffhanger, as we are left to wonder what will happen next? Will there be a faithful remnant of God's people who remember the law? And what about God's promises here? How and when will they take place?

As the curtain rises on the New Testament four hundred years later, (and that's a pretty long intermission by the way), we do see these questions being answered! There IS a faithful remnant, and God's promises are beginning to be realized. Here is the third reason: it's a significant transitional story, a bridge linking the first act to the one that is to follow. Beginnings, a confirmation, and a bridge are all good reasons to consider why Luke added this account. There is a one last reason to consider. This section is part of Luke's larger birth narrative that goes all the way through chapter 2. There's a wonderful interplay comparing and contrasting the birth stories of John and Jesus. I would encourage you read through this section as you look forward to the Christmas season. Luke's birth narrative would be incomplete without this opening story.

Who are these two people?

Having considered why Luke writes our story, it's now time to turn our attention to these two people, Zechariah and Elizabeth. We can make three observations about them. The **first** has to do with their names. Names in this culture were significant; they had meaning and were generally well chosen. So Zechariah's parents gave him his special name meaning, "**Yahweh remembers**." Elizabeth's parents gave her a special name meaning either "**the oath of God**" or "**my God is faithful**." It is interesting that by combining the two names we get a glimpse of the theme at the heart of this opening scene in Luke's gospel: **God is remembering his oath and his promises**. Now names are significant, but so is how our couple is introduced in verses 5-7:

“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 righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly.** But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.” Luke 1:5-7

It is here that we come to our **second observation**. There is something really attractive about them spiritually. Luke tells us they were **faithful people in right relationship to God**. Did you notice how Luke describes both Zechariah and Elizabeth? He says they were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. They were faithful people in right relationship to God. That may not sound very extraordinary to our 21st century ears, until we consider some of the rest of the story. What did it mean for them to be faithful people? Just what did their faithfulness have to endure at this time? There are at least three possible problems their faithfulness endured.

Problem #1

First of all, their **faithfulness** endured despite the humiliation and shame of being unable to have children. In verse 25, Elizabeth praises God for “taking away her disgrace among the people.” There was the sense in this culture that some sin must have kept them from having children. Many would have assumed the worst possible cause for their condition. It would have also been a tremendously difficult time watching everyone else having and raising children. Life is not always kind, nor is it always fair. Yet these cultural perceptions did not deter the faithful couple. To them, being faithful meant there’s only ONE perception that mattered—God’s. That’s a good lesson for us all to heed.

Problem #2

Secondly, we see that their **faithfulness** endured despite the fact that many would have counseled Zechariah to divorce Elizabeth, and find someone else who could bear him children. Jewish teachers generally insisted that a man divorce a childless wife so he could have children. In their culture to be childless meant many things. Chief among them was the fact that there was no one to take care of them in their old age. There were no pensions, no 401k’s, no SSI, no assisted living facilities. Family was the primary social unit, and one’s ancestry was critically important. The economic and social ramifications would weigh heavily upon them. But Zechariah chose to stay married to Elizabeth. There is a great love story here! Maybe I’m a romantic at heart, but without some sort of great love, faithfulness will not endure. Another good lesson from these senior citizens!

Problem #3

There is a third way their **faithfulness** endured. It endured despite the fact that their prayers went unanswered, for a long, long time. This makes them spiritually intriguing to me. There are times when I’ve cried out, “how long God, how long? Do you hear me?” Yet year after year and decade after decade, these two prayed. This is really amazing to me. They were people of prayer; it was part of their lifestyle. This is a third good lesson for me and you if we too intend to be faithful people in right relationship to God.

Zechariah and Elizabeth have significant names, and they have an attractive spiritual life. Our **third observation** takes a closer look at their personal lives. If we dig a little deeper into Zechariah’s work as a priest, we find he is one of around 18,000 priests in the land at this time. He belongs to the priestly division of Abijah. This division was the eighth of 24 priestly divisions instituted by King David. They would serve in the temple two nonconsecutive weeks out of the year, plus special festivals. Each division was made up of around 750 priests, many more than needed for any given function in the temple, so priests were chosen by the casting of lots for specific tasks. The casting of lots was something like throwing dice to determine God’s will.

Luke also tells us that Zechariah is “very old.” Many scholars indicate that based on the language used and information given, Zechariah is certainly beyond childbearing years and possibly 60 years old or more, meaning they probably have been married for at least 43 years. The image of this couple would have reminded people of the account of Abraham and Sarah, yet another echo from the OT.

We also find out about Elizabeth many of the same things associated with Zechariah. She’s married to him, of course, and she’s unable to have children. We are also told that, like her husband, she was

very old. She is also a descendant of Aaron, meaning she too was from the priestly lineage. It was considered a special blessing for a priest to marry a Godly woman of priestly ancestry. Together they made their home in the hill country of Judea. Elizabeth is an individual who recognizes God's grace in her life. She responds with praise, as we shall see at the end of our story today. Later on in Luke we find out she is also a relative of Mary the mother of Jesus, and she is the first person to recognize and testify about the coming of Jesus.

What about the story?

So far we have looked at the significance of Zechariah and Elizabeth's names, and considered their spiritual and personal lives. Now we are ready to ask, what is going on here? In order to do so, I'd like to focus on four specific questions.

The **first** question is, what is so special about this time of Zechariah's service?

Second, what is unique about Zechariah's experience?

Third, did Zechariah learn anything from the angel?

And **finally**, how does the story end--how does Elizabeth respond?

Zechariah's Service

Zechariah is chosen by lot to serve a specific function: the burning of incense. It was a great honor and blessing; and once chosen, you could not ever be chosen again. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity, one every priest hoped to serve, but not all would have the chance. It would have been very high on Zechariah's bucket list. Short of seeing the Messiah, this would have been the highlight of his career!

To get a quick visual of Zechariah's task, take a look at these pictures. (*Three slides are now shown to illustrate where Zechariah served at this time*) This is a massive, imposing and awe-inspiring temple where he is serving. It is said to have been around 20 stories tall (taller than tamarack hall at BSU!). The next picture is a cut away view of the temple. Notice the curtain that separates the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. The altar of incense, as seen here, is located right in front of this curtain.

Now the burning of incense occurred twice daily, before the morning sacrifice and after the evening sacrifice. There were three priests employed in the service of the incense; one carried away the leftover ashes; another brought a pan of burning coals from the altar of sacrifice, placed it on the altar of incense and left. A third priest went in with the incense, and sprinkled it on the burning coals. While the smoke ascended, he briefly prayed for the people and then withdrew immediately. The burning incense was a symbol of the peoples' prayers rising up to God. This was the task that fell to Zechariah, and the most honorable in the whole service.

Zechariah's Experience

It is at this juncture that Zechariah has a visitor—an angel, with a wonderful message. He is beyond startled and in great fear, with his heart, no doubt, racing faster than it ever has before. He hears about a son, a wonder and a joy. That son will be special in the sight of God and his people. God has both a job for him to do and a name to give him. Talk about information and emotional overload! How does Zechariah process all this good news? Well to put it in a more modern voice he says, "What are you talking about, Gabe? Have you taken a look at me and Lizzy lately? I just cannot wrap my mind around all this!" Can you prove it?

Despite all Zechariah's right "stuff," his pedigree and faithful life, what is unique here is that he still fails. He fails to believe God's word, and will have to spend the next nine months or so in silence thinking about his failure. Can you identify with him? I can. Despite living as best as I can, I still fail. But God is gracious, isn't he? That is comforting to me and I hope to you as well.

Zechariah's Education

There is one other idea for us to notice. Gabriel tells us something very important as he educates Zechariah right after his failure to believe. Listen as he scolds him.

"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. ²⁰ 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 appointed time.**" Luke 1:19-20

Gabriel' scolding teaches Zechariah that God's good news will come true at the appointed time. It is important for us to understand that not only will God be faithful and fulfill his promises, but they will come at a time that is uniquely known to him, and are often accomplished in unique ways as well.

Elizabeth's Response

After learning about Zechariah's service, his experience, and his education, we come to the end of our story. It is here we find that God's good news has come true: Elizabeth is pregnant! She is full of praise and sets about getting herself prepared for the next five months. What is interesting is how Luke contrasts her response with Zechariah's. As Zechariah somehow tells his wife about his experience and failure, how would she respond? Would she forgive him? How strong was her love for Zechariah and just how would she respond?

Reading between the lines, it is clear that she was all for God's plan. Her response was the opposite of Zechariah's! She believed. She did not shut her husband out. Her love was still strong, and her faithfulness to him and to her God never wavered. Thank God for such an inspiration!

Conclusion

What a great story Luke has provided, with an interesting purpose and intriguing people. I want to leave you with three points that are as true today as they were then, whether you are seniors like Zechariah and Elizabeth, a young person, or somewhere in between. If you remember nothing else, please remember this:

Number 1. God is faithful to his promises. Hold to them and trust that he who has promised will keep his word.

Number 2. God's promises and plan will come about at the time and manner of his own choosing. And Number 3. God's people need to be faithful people in right relationship to him.

Like Zechariah & Elizabeth, let us be faithful to our faithful God, who is in control of all things, even time. May this faithful One shine ever so brightly in your hearts today, tomorrow and always! Amen.

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on December 3, 2017 by Scott Engelstad

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