

Lessons from Zechariah
St. James Presbyterian Church

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November 30, 2008

Luke 1:5-20

In order to understand our story to the fullest requires that we take a minute and reflect. Consider what would be the best day of our lives, to this point. For me, I've had a few days to prepare. I'm still not sure which of my days has been the best. It might have been the day Polly and I were married twenty-five years ago. It might have been the days on which our children were born. I could think of many days worth honoring. How about you?

For our purposes today we can guess which the best day of Zechariah's life was. It was the day he was invited to burn incense in the Holy Place of the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. This was in about 6-7 BC. Zechariah was born into a priestly family, which meant that he was also destined to be a priest. We would certainly say there was a surplus of priests. There were twenty four divisions of Aaronic priests, because Aaron had twenty four sons. Thousands of them were available at any given time.

It was the priest's duty to keep incense burning on the altar in front of the Most Holy Place. He would supply it with fresh incense before the morning sacrifice and again after the evening sacrifice. All the priests wanted the privilege. It was a great honor. Each priest might hope to be chosen to burn incense in the Most Holy Place once in his lifetime. But so many priests were available that a way would need to be devised to choose who would go on a given day. So they cast lots. That was an approved old method of discerning God's will.

On his appointed day Zechariah was praying in the Most Holy Place while the people waited outside (that was one of the reasons the priests wanted the assignment. No one else was allowed inside. The remainder of the people were required to remain outside and pray. They waited for the reappearance of the priest and for his blessing. To Zechariah's complete surprise, Gabriel (his name means mighty man of God) one of the seven archangels of that period, visited him. Gabriel told Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would become pregnant and give birth to a child, who would be named John. The child would bring his parents joy and gladness, would be raised in the Nazirite tradition (that is, he would grow up under strict rules. One was that no strong drink would touch his lips, ever) and in the spirit of Elijah. He would announce the end time and prepare Israel for it.

If we review the angel Gabriel's visit from Zechariah's perspective we would see a husband and wife who had struggled for decades with infertility. In those days a couple dealing with infertility not only lived with the disappointment of not having a child of their own, but infertility brought feelings of shame. The

community believed that infertility was evidence of God's reproach. Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth is called "barren." The woman was blamed for it, not the man. Now Zechariah and Elizabeth were also described as blameless, which meant they strictly observed the Jewish laws. They were not sinless, but were striving to follow God's commands.

When Gabriel announced to Zechariah that his wife would have a child, no doubt he remembered their many years of infertility, seeing other couples raising children, each one a silent reminder of their disgrace. To make matters worse, Zechariah and Elizabeth were very old, far beyond childbearing years. To no one's surprise, Zechariah does not believe the angel. I suspect he finds it impossible to review that sad chapter in his life and replace disappointment with hope. Instead he asks Gabriel for a sign, some proof that this prophecy would come to pass. But Gabriel evidently thinks his presence beside Zechariah in the temple should be proof enough. So the old man is struck dumb, that is, he is no longer allowed to speak.

Zechariah goes home after his big day in the temple. His wife, Elizabeth does indeed become pregnant, even in her old age, and a child is born. We can read in Luke 2:57 of the birth of her son. Since Zechariah can't speak, the child's mother explains that his name is to be John. When his father agrees, his power of speech returns.

Here are some lessons I find in the text:

First, those divine appointments happened then and still take place today. I am not so sure that Gabriel stands beside many people these days. Neither am I sure that he does not. Surely encounters with God or his messengers still happen. This story reminds us of how God involves Himself in the lives of his people. Remember Jesus' words to the apostles, "Lo, I will be with you always." I've had divine appointments and perhaps you have, too. Are you open to the possibility? If you have had one, please come tell me about it. I want to hear your story. This divine appointment happened in the temple, while the people were praying. If we want to increase the likelihood of our having divine appointments we will be found worshipping God in the sanctuary. Even more to the point, we will be found praying. We know God joins us here each Lord's Day in this place, whether we feel his presence at the time or not. Now even as I offer this lesson about divine appointments and encourage you to be alert to them, I also want to offer a word of caution. If we witness a number of these divine appointments we may be tempted to worship the appointments themselves, the surprising, supernatural visitations of the Spirit, rather than the God who orchestrates them.

Second: God's timing is different from ours. Many of us would often describe God's timing as extremely late. Zechariah would have said the same before his encounter with Gabriel. Zechariah had already given up hope of ever fathering a

child. But God's timing is perfect. Remember the verse from Isaiah 55 that says: "My ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Third: God deals gently with doubters. He could have killed Zechariah for doubting him while Gabriel the archangel stood by, or he could have chosen another couple to be John's parents. But God did not. He simply stopped Zechariah's doubting words until they could be replaced by faithful ones. He deals as gently with our own doubts. Stories of doubters are found all through the Bible. The most famous is Thomas, one of the twelve apostles and we know Thomas went on to be one of the most faithful of Jesus' followers. So if you are a doubter from time to time, you are in good company. Just realize that God intends to turn doubters into faithful disciples, so get ready to be changed.

Fourth, remember that this story at its core is not about Zechariah or about John, but rather it is about God's plan to send his son to save his people from their sins. It's about God's love for us in sending Jesus.

Conclusion: John, the child of Zechariah and Elizabeth in their old age, grows up to become John the Baptist, the one who announces the coming of the Savior. Today's Advent message is about waiting for God's timing, about how God intervenes in human affairs, about the sinfulness of human hearts and our need for a savior. It's about how gently God deals with Zechariah's doubts and ours. We approach a birthday celebration, but not just any birthday. We are admonished to get ready, to prepare our hearts – because as we prepare for Jesus' birthday He will be with us, just as he promises, not because we deserve or earn it, but just because he loves us and wants a relationship with us.

When we finally comprehend God's love for us in Jesus, then any and every day can be the best day of our lives.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.