

“The Announcement To Zacharias”

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

Series: “Announce His Coming!” [Advent #1]

Pastor Lyle L. Wahl

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Introduction

Advent, and the Christmas season has begun. For many the mad rush is getting under way. Planning, buying, decorating, partying have all taken off, as they do every year. In the U.S., “*Black Friday*” on November 23rd lived up to its name and moved many business out of the red into the black with an estimated \$20 Billion in retail sales.

Yesterday, as I drove to the church on Gateway Blvd., approaching TOYS ’R US, I noticed the parking lot was fairly full, especially for early in the morning. Then I noticed there was a *long* lineup outside the store. I don’t know what specials they had, but there were a lot of people eager to buy them.

In spite of all the suggestions and warnings each year, many people will experience more mayhem than joy and peace again this year.

As we move toward Christmas, our emphasis will be on “*Announce His Coming!*” We will look at the Biblical announcements made when Jesus came, and the people who heard them. There are many valuable lessons for us in the announcements and from these people. As well, we will look at our privilege to “*Announce His Coming.*” This morning we being with “*The Announcement To Zacharias.*”

Highlights Of The Announcement.

Setting the scene.

Before Luke introduces us to Mary and Joseph and the birth of Jesus, he draws back the curtain on some events not recorded anywhere else in the Bible. Starting at 1:5 Luke features a priest named Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth.

Both were godly in character and lifestyle, as we read in verse 6, “They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.”

This scene opens with Zacharias in Jerusalem for his turn of service at the temple. The priests were divided into 24 groups. Zacharias was part of the division or course of Abijah (5). The priests lived in designated towns. Each group traveled to Jerusalem for a week of service two times each year at the temple. They also, of course, went to Jerusalem for the mandatory annual festivals. Most of the time, then, they were in their home towns, where they didn’t have many formal functions. So, many of them were bi-vocational, holding down other jobs. Others spent time teaching the Scriptures and practices as well as giving counsel and direction. Zacharias and Elizabeth had come to Jerusalem for his special time of service at the temple.

Something unexpected happened on one of the days of that week of service. By tradition, the various duties in the temple were determined by lot for each day. One of the very special duties was entering the Holy Place and burning incense before God. Incense was used to honor God in worship and symbolize the people's prayers. Many of the priests, who served from age 25 to 55, never had this privilege. Those who did, could only be chosen once.

The lot to burn incense in the Holy Place fell to Zacharias that day. Because it was such an honor, his family and friends gathered in the outer temple courts as he performed this duty. As Zacharias came into the Holy Place, to the Altar of Incense, something unexpected, something startling took place—the angel Gabriel appeared to him.

Try to imagine yourself in his place! Or, picture yourself coming to a few quiet moments by yourself to be with God, and ... there he is, the angel Gabriel! Verse 12 tells us Zacharias was “troubled” — this term comes from a word meaning to stir up, disturb, throw into confusion. In the words of the old Elvis song, “I’m all shook up!” As well, Luke says “fear gripped him” — he was frozen in the icy grip of fear.

God chose this time to tell Zacharias through the angel that the thing he and his wife had been praying about for years was going to be answered—*finally!* Finally they were going to have a child, a son. A son with a very special mission. Not to be a priest like Zacharias, but to be the one who would go before and prepare the way of the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior. This was unbelievably great news! He was going to have a son *and* the Messiah was coming!

We might expect Zacharias to break into a song of praise. But that's not how he responded. In effect, he said, “Wait a minute, Gabriel. No offense, but how can I be sure about this? I mean, my wife and I aren't that young anymore. I certainly don't want to make a fool of myself by telling everyone about this, and then find out it was just a dream!” Gabriel responded, “You doubt me? Me, the mighty Gabriel who comes from the presence of God to you with this great news? You want to know for sure, you want a sign? I'll give you a sign. Because you doubted this, you will be humbled by not being able to speak until your son is born.” *And so it was.*

So it was, until the day of the baby's circumcision and official naming eight days after his birth that Zacharias could speak again. When he did speak again, directed by the Holy Spirit, there were words of praise, and even prophecy. He blessed God because of ... his son? Listen,

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old...” (68-70)

And then he goes on to speak of God's mercy and faithfulness in remembering His promise. It's not until verse 76 that he makes mention of his son. All that he said was giving praise

and glorify to God. This is the substance and flow of “The Announcement To Zacharias.” Let’s move on to some principles that God has for us here.

Principles From The Announcement.

First, godliness does not guarantee the best, or even good circumstances. If you have been with us over the last few months, this probably sounds familiar. You might even wonder if we somehow are still in the book of Job. God described Job as “a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil” (1:8; 2:3). In spite of that,

- all of his children were killed;
- all of his wealth was taken away;
- his health was ruined;
- his wife’s support vanished;
- he went from being “the greatest of all the men of the east” to being thought of as “the greatest of all the *hypocrites* of the east.”

Yes, Job teaches us that “Godliness does not guarantee the best, or even good circumstances.”

We also see this truth clearly in Zacharias and Elizabeth. Verse 6 tells us “They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.” What more could you say? It is not that they were perfect or never sinned. But what they learned of God’s truth they accepted and lived. When God spoke, directed, convicted them from His Word, they recognized, confessed and followed. They were the mature, godly people we want to be.

But, they were unable to have children. To have children, we know, is a natural, deep desire. Some Jewish people of their day thought if you did not have children, you were being punished for some sin. Verse 25 tells us Zacharias and Elizabeth felt the sting of those accusations.

They were godly, but their expectation and longing for children was withheld; their prayers for this seemed to go unnoticed. “Godliness does not guarantee the best or even good circumstances.”

What was true for Job, Zacharias and Elizabeth is still true. We have heard this before, perhaps even many times. Yet, when problems and disappointments come to us, we ask,

- “Why? Why didn’t God stop that from happening? Why didn’t God intervene to stop it from going on?”
- “Why didn’t God do this for me? Why doesn’t He do this for me? I know He can. I know He loves me. I know He knows how important it is to me.”

We need to pause, restate and remember this truth because it runs contrary to what we

naturally expect. Like Job's friends, it seems only logical that God should bless the good things we do and punish the bad things, *now*.

We also need to give attention to this principle because there continues to be so much of the thinking that you can have health and wealth through the right kind, the right formula, the right person of faith. This false teaching continues to flourish. It continues to take advantage of and use people, and leave them more confused and guilt-ridden than before.

“Godliness does not guarantee the best or even good circumstances.”

An important corollary is that God's will is good. Certainly Zacharias and Elizabeth found God's will to be good. Verses 13-16 give the promise,

“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.’”

We see the fulfillment in 57-58,

“Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her.”

This passage also shows us that God's will is good for everyone as it gives the news, as it signals the coming of the Savior. Verse 17 states the mission of their son, John the Baptist, with respect to the coming Savior,

“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.”

Then, starting at verse 76 this continues and extends to the purpose of the coming Savior,

“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, because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us, TO SHINE UPON THOSE WHO SIT IN DARKNESS AND THE SHADOW OF DEATH, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (76-79)

God's will *is* good ... good for you, good for me. When circumstances are good and when

they are bad. So often we major on our circumstances. Often we try to touch them up a bit.

Humorist Art Buchwald, who died in January, once wrote, “My wife is one of the luckiest women in the world. Don’t take my word for it— ask all her friends. Last summer she tripped on a rock and broke her wrist. Ordinarily you would call this a piece of bad luck, but it turns out she did everything just right.

“This is the way the conversation went a day after the accident. ‘My wife broke her wrist.’ ‘Was it the right one or the left one?’ ‘The left.’ ‘She’s lucky it was the left. If she broke the right it could be twice as inconvenient.’

“The next friend wanted to know if after she tripped she fell forward or backward. ‘I’m not sure. Does it matter?’ ‘Of course it matters! If she fell forward it was the best thing that could happen, because otherwise she could have injured her back. And, by breaking her fall with her hand, she saved injuring her nose.’

“A neighbor said, ‘I heard your wife had a fall.’ ‘Yes, she broke her wrist.’ ‘It could have been her hip. Some women are born lucky. The trick of any bone injury is to break it in the right place at the right time.’ ‘How can you do that?’ ‘When you break something you have to be in close proximity to an orthopedic surgeon who isn’t out playing golf when you need him.’ ‘Our doctor wasn’t even out fishing.’ ‘Then she really is a lucky woman. I hope she realizes it!’ the neighbor said.

Buchwald concludes, “She does—every time she falls.”

Beyond the humor, beyond the surface, God’s will is good *for* us and also good *to* us. The apostle Paul wrote about being in the *position* for realizing this in Romans 12, which he opened with, “... I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”

This is a statement that is so familiar, and so frequently ignored. God’s will is good, always. But until we assume this *position* we will not know how good it is *to* us. Until we present all that we are and ever hope to be, all that we have and ever hope to have to God without reservation.

In the next verse Paul writes about the *process* for realizing this. “...do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (2). It is the process of rejecting the view and values of this world that is separate from and opposed to God. The process of allowing God to renew our minds with the His truth in the Bible so that we are transformed in our thinking and values.

“God’s will *is* good.”

A third principle here is that mature, godly people have questions and doubts. Zacharias and Elizabeth were godly. They also had questions and doubts. Zacharias was troubled, frightened when Gabriel appeared. He doubted, questioned, “did not believe” the message of God through Gabriel.

“Mature, godly people have questions and doubts.” This truth sometimes takes us by surprise. The stereotype of *having it all together* is so entrenched that we are not only surprised, but sometimes disappointed when a spiritually mature person shares a question, doubt or struggle. We may even feel that he or she has let *us* down!

But when it comes to ourselves, well, it most often is not a surprise. We *just know* that spiritually mature people are not supposed to have questions and doubts. So we keep it all to ourselves, for fear of what others will think of us. And so there is this unofficial, but sometimes strictly enforced code of silence when it comes to questions and doubts.

Yet all through the Bible we find this truth, in one godly person after another. The only way to never have any questions or doubts is to go into a coma ... and stay there!

Tim Stafford writes, “Each doubt is different. Prayers aren’t answered. Some sin seems unconquerable. A church service appears suddenly absurd. Scripture, prayer, worship become dry and mechanical. The suffering of a friend drags on inexplicably. The Bible and science seem irreconcilable. Christian experiences become easily explained coincidences. The miracles of the Bible turn into craziness, the belief of loonies. “Is there a God? And if there is a God, then (*the thought occurs*) what are you doing wrong? Your faith must be inadequate. Has God given up on you?”

Yes, “Mature, godly people have questions and doubts.” Face this fact head on. Realize that as you cling to God, His grace and wisdom, in His time the sun *will* break through, and your faith will be deepened and enriched.

One final principle, faithfulness completes the journey to praise. Let’s look at this in Zacharias and Elizabeth. Their doubts and fears were real, but they did not get stuck there. They continued to move on with God. They were *faithful*.

Elizabeth praised God when she became pregnant. “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” (25). Notice the last part of the verse: this was not real disgrace, but disgrace only in the minds of others.

In verse 13 Gabriel told Zacharias, “you will give him [your son] the name John.” He was faithful to this command, even though it puzzled many because there was no one named John in their immediate family and, traditionally, children were most often named after someone in the family.

Only when they were faithful to what God told them did Zacharias regain his ability to speak. His first words,

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant” (68-69)

Zacharias and Elizabeth traveled from hope to fear and doubt, to expectation and then, finally to praise. “Faithfulness completes the journey to praise.”

Often we would like to skip this principle. Sometimes we do. Then we wonder why the shout of joy in the morning does not come. Zacharias and Elizabeth teach us the importance of step by step faithfulness. Faithfulness in difficult times as well as in good times. Faithfulness in routine duties as well as grand opportunities and dramatic challenges.

Listen to this testimony. A woman writes, “Last Sunday was my turn in the nursery. My heart wasn’t in it. My feelings were hurt. A child did not want to part from his mother, and cried a lot. I prayed the hour would end soon, so I could relax. Soon the hour was over and it felt so good to be free. I said, ‘Once a month is too much!’ This Sunday as I sat in the pew an invitation was given. A woman came down the aisle and was saved. It was the mother of that baby who was crying the week before. Then it dawned on me that I had a part in that woman giving her heart to God. From this day on I will never dread working in the nursery while souls are being fed.”

“Faithfulness completes the journey to praise.”

Conclusion.

“*The Announcement To Zacharias*” is a very important historical account, *and so much more!* We want to *Announce Jesus’ Coming* with sincerity and joy this Christmas season. As the season begins, remember ...

- Godliness does not guarantee the best, or even good circumstances.
- God’s will is good.
- Mature, godly people have questions and doubts.
- Faithfulness completes the journey to praise.

As you spend a few moments with God now, thank Him for the example of Zacharias and Elizabeth, for their faithfulness, and for the truths we see in them. Begin to evaluate where you are with respect to each of the four principles we have seen—and continue to do that throughout the week. Determine to intentionally and joyfully *Announce Christ’s Coming* to people throughout this season.