

You Shall Call His Name John
Luke 1:5-25
November 29, 2020
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CenterPoint Church

Read Luke 1:5-25

Hebrews 4:12 - *“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*

Introduction:

Last week we looked at Luke’s purpose for writing this book, his qualifications, and his audience. You would assume that, like Matthew and John, Luke would begin his gospel talking about Jesus. This is Jesus’ biography from His birth (coming down from heaven) to His ascension (going back to heaven). So why not get right to it? But Luke follows Mark’s example of starting with the forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist. Of course, all four Gospels talk about John, but Luke by far has the most information about him, including the beautiful story surrounding his birth that none of the other Gospel writers included.

Whenever somebody wins an award, do they declare it and give it to themselves? No! When an athlete is inducted into the Hall of Fame, they have one of their teammates or coaches, somebody important to them, give a big speech introducing them. When Magic Johnson was inducted into the NBA Hall of Fame, Larry Bird, his legendary rival, introduced him with a speech. When Julia Louis-Dreyfus won the Mark Twain Comedy Award, Jerry Seinfeld introduced her. People winning awards and important distinctions do not announce their own achievements, they don’t tell you how great they are – they have someone else do it for them. It sounds a little manipulative, but it’s also really smart, because others will listen better when someone else has praised you than when you praise yourself. Jesus did not announce Himself to the world, someone else came before Him to prepare people for His arrival. That man was John, and thankfully Luke had interviewed either his parents or others who were close to his parents to find out the events surrounding his birth.

In the first 6 verses, we are introduced to a priest and his wife, with special attention to their ancestry, age, employment, and then something very personal and difficult,

I. Elizabeth’s Barrenness (vv. 5-10)

⁵ In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. ⁸ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were both from the tribe of Levi, meaning that they were both descendants of priests. This helped define Zechariah’s life, since he has fulfilled his duty by becoming a priest and serving in the temple. Luke also mentions that they were righteous and blameless in all of the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which doesn’t mean that they were sinless, but that they were godly people who followed the law. Then there is a “but” in verse 7 – *“but they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.”* Luke seems

to be saying “they were righteous and blameless so you’d expect them to have been blessed with kids (as all righteous people are blessed, right?), **but** they didn’t.” It’s not what you’re expecting. This is hardly the first godly barren couple, though, that you meet in the pages of Scripture: Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 16-18; Rachel, Jacob’s wife, in Genesis 30; Samson’s parents in Judges 13; Samuel’s parents in 1 Samuel 1; all kinds of barren women in the OT. Each of these women received the gift of a child from the Lord after waiting a long time for it.

Verse nine says that Zechariah was chosen by lot to enter the temple and burn incense. In case you think that he did that all the time, and you rush right through that verse thinking, “Of course, he’s a priest doing his duties in the temple, just like Dave does whatever he does all week at church,” you need to know that this only happened once a lifetime for the priests! It was a huge and rare honor for a priest to officiate at the sacrifice and to go inside the Holy of Holies of the Temple. Bible scholar, Darrell Bock, explains that Zechariah “was a member of one of twenty-four divisions in the first century priesthood, one of approximately 18,000 priests... A priest only officiated at the sacrifice once in his life, having been selected by lot.”¹

So God chose a very significant time to speak to Zechariah, as we’ll see in the next 7 verses

II. Gabriel’s Announcement (vv. 11-17)

¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

Zechariah started fulfilling his responsibilities in the Court of the Priests where the sacrifice made, then he went through the curtain to the Holy Place, where the table of showbread, the altar of incense, and the golden candlestick were – Exodus chapters 30 and 37 include the details about how the temple was laid out.² And what’s interesting is that there were cherubim (angels) woven into the curtain, and there were two images of angels on the Ark of the Covenant, but suddenly a real angel was standing right in front of him. As Zechariah was engaged in the most intense worship time of his life, an angel unexpectedly appeared to him. He might have been thinking, “the other priests didn’t mention this” if he hadn’t been so petrified. As with almost every time an angel appears in Scripture, the first thing this angel said was, “Do not be afraid.”

Do you remember the last two verses of the Old Testament? Malachi 4:6-7: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” The angel’s message in vv. 16-17 are that prophecy coming to bear 400 years after they were originally spoken! This will be the effect of the child’s life and ministry: turning the hearts of the children of Israel to God, turning the father’s hearts to their children, the spirit and power of Elijah manifested in him. We just spent three months studying Elijah’s life, so we know what “*the spirit and power of Elijah*” means, right? A man who spoke God’s truth to power,

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 48.

² R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know The Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 23.

who stood strongly against idolatry, and who handed off his ministry to someone who came after him. These will all be strong features of John's life!

Many people have assumed that the prohibition against drinking alcohol for John meant that he was a Nazirite like Samson. Maybe, but Samson had additional restrictions on his life: he could never cut his hair or touch a dead body. I think that the main reason for prohibiting alcohol was that if John was known to drink alcohol, that would have been too convenient an explanation for his opponents: "Oh, of course John is out in the desert telling everyone to repent. He's drunk." But they couldn't make that accusation if John was a strict teetotaler. Of course, even then people could accuse him of other things; later in Luke (7:33-34) Jesus would say, "*For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinner!'*" A prophet is usually misunderstood, and so John would be. But Jesus also said about him: "*I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John*" (Luke 7:28a).

After the angel's prophecy, Zechariah went from being filled with fear to being filled with doubt:

III. Zechariah's Unbelief (vv. 18-25)

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." ²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² And 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. ²³ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. ²⁴ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ²⁵ "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

Zechariah's questions and doubts were interpreted by Gabriel as disbelief. Men can father children very late in life – Clint Eastwood and Steve Martin had kids in their mid-sixties and Billy Joel became a father for the second time at age 71. For women, not so much. Menopause in mid-life puts an end to their reproductive cycles and makes it impossible to have children. Zechariah understood basic biology. So he asked the angel, "*How shall I know this?*" You mean, besides an angel appearing to you? I can understand if some random guy walked up to him in the street and said, "The Lord told me that your wife is going to have a baby" or if Zechariah just had an emotional reaction to seeing a baby and had a strong feeling in his gut that it was time that they had a miracle baby. He would have been right to question those things. But a fierce heavenly being appearing in the temple – that's not enough?

But, keep in mind, that he had probably given up all hope for having a child, now he was being told that not only would his wife bear him a child, but that child would fulfill the last prophecy of the Scriptures! I hope you don't judge Zechariah too harshly for his doubts, because how often do our doubts get the best of us? Here's what this passage tells us (one of the things): God still works even when we doubt. There may be times that He waits for you to believe and ask Him in faith, but other times He's going to accomplish His work with or without you. Whether you're on board or not, the freight train's moving. He may have to drag you, He may have to gag you (like Zechariah), but He's getting it done.

So, because he did not believe the angel's words, Zechariah was stripped of his words. When Zechariah came out of the temple, the people were waiting for him to pronounce the normal blessing, but clearly Zechariah could not do that. And then he had to figure out how to tell his wife what was coming, through some combination of charades and writing things down. And Elizabeth hid herself for five months. Why? Too many questions, too much gossip for an old woman to be pregnant, I suppose. But she anxiously anticipated that people would stop looking down on her for her barrenness, that the Lord would take away her reproach, verse 25 says. How like the Lord to use the birth of his great prophet that will bless the whole nation to also bless this barren couple!

Conclusion

If you don't know much about infertility, it's a lot more common than you probably think it is: up to 1 in 8 women and 1 in 6 couples suffer from infertility. Anywhere from 10% to 25% of pregnancies will end in a miscarriage.³ One couple, Philip and Kimberly Monroe, described their infertility in an article: "One unique thing about infertility is the hope/despair cycle. At the beginning of her monthly cycle, a woman has great hope. I'm going to get pregnant this month. I know it. The month ends. No pregnancy. She despairs. The next month comes. Great hope again. But no pregnancy. Hope careens down to despair. When she's in treatment for infertility, the woman has hope. She forces herself through the process, trying more things, doing more things. She hopes. But, the higher the hope, the deeper the fall. The despair side intensifies after each failure to conceive."⁴

A lot of infertile couples will not tell anyone, particularly because of the way people respond with very little tact or grace. I asked someone whose doctor has told them they could not have children what the most painful comments that people said when they shared that news, and he said two things: "Which one of you is the problem?" He didn't appreciate that question because together they would not be having a child naturally. The second was, "Just adopt, then you'll get pregnant," as if it was a guarantee. Infertile couples struggle with heartache, anguish, anger, sadness, hopelessness, and feeling isolated. So please, *please* treat them with compassion and care. They don't need easy answers that often sting a lot: "Just adopt" or "Count your blessings in other areas" or "You can have one of mine, ha ha." They may need your shoulder to cry on, your prayers, and your support.

In Elizabeth and Zechariah, we see a couple who were grieved by their inability to have a child. Elizabeth said that when she finally conceived that it would "*take away my reproach among people.*" Another way to say that would be to say it took away her disgrace. There was a very real stigma back then – children were a huge deal to carry on the line and handle a family's business. And there was the underlying assumption that if you were childless or had some other disaster or problem that it was a punishment for doing something wrong. Surely the righteous would be blessed with children from the Lord, right?

But what does the text indicate about these two while they were still childless? They were faithful and blameless through it all. Through their crying out to God, asking Him why He had not given them children, they were still be godly and faithful. I can't imagine the pain and frustration of infertility, and I'm sure that I took having kids whenever we wanted to for granted. I'm sure that it's

³ <https://americanpregnancy.org/healthy-pregnancy/pregnancy-complications/signs-of-miscarriage-916/#:~:text=Miscarriage%20is%20the%20most%20common%20type%20of%20pregnancy,pregnancies%20may%20account%20for%2050-75%25%20of%20all%20miscarriages.>

⁴ Kimberly and Philip Monroe's article, "The Bible and the Pain of Infertility," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Winter 2005 (found at <https://abbafund.files.wordpress.com/2010/01/the-bible-and-the-pain-of-infertility1.pdf>), p. 51.

difficult to fight bitterness and not resent God, but He calls us to be faithful in all circumstances. Because you could expand that and say, “Well, if God doesn’t give me the spouse that I want, then I won’t follow Him.” Or, “if God doesn’t give me the fulfilling career and life that I want, then why have I been acting good all this time?” Or “if God takes my parent, my spouse, or my child in death at an age that I’m not ready for them to go, then God is not good, and I don’t want any part of Him.” Those are somewhat natural responses to disappointments in life, but ultimately we follow God for who He is not what we get from Him. I mean, we’re all a jumble of mixed-motives, and I realize that I have expectations that I can be very disappointed if they aren’t met too. But Zechariah and Elizabeth remind us that we can be upright and godly followers even in pain and disappointment. But not as a way to get something out of God, but loyal and obedient no matter what God ordained to pass in their lives.

We have friends named Caleb and Jenn who could not conceive for a long time. We have had many other friends who had trouble getting pregnant, but for Jenn it was devastating every time she would get her hopes up – she had multiple miscarriages. She shared a lot in a blog post about the emotional roller-coaster they were on, and the emotional pain and exhaustion that they had been dealing with between miscarriages, trying different procedures, and dealing with people’s expectations. Jenn wrote this: “I have started wearing a necklace that says, ‘And if not, He is still good,’ based on Daniel 3:17-18. It’s a simple reminder to me that God is merciful, and just, and has the best plan. Simply put, if God does not grant Caleb and my desire to have children, then He is still good. Our job is to obey and trust Him. I wear it because I struggle with this truth on a daily basis, sometimes hourly. I can’t tell you how many times I have cried out with bitter tears, asking God to fulfill my longing. I don’t know if He will. Or He may fulfill it in a way I cannot yet understand.”⁵ After many years, Caleb and Jenn had a beautiful baby girl and we greatly rejoiced with them. They hope to have more, but they trust God’s love regardless of how many children He gives them. Sometimes God answers prayers with yes, like them and like Zechariah and Elizabeth, other times He answers no. We can struggle with those answers, but may we be faithful either way.

I want to circle back to one idea: How can we be “righteous before God” like Zechariah and Elizabeth were? Verse 6 says that they walked “*blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.*” Is that how we achieve righteousness, by keeping God’s commandments and statutes? But Ephesians 2:9 says that we have been saved “*not a result of works, so that no one may boast*” and Isaiah 64:6 says that “*we have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.*” How about the way that Zechariah was a priest and worshipped in the temple? Can we become righteous by doing religiously worship things? In Isaiah 29:13, the Lord says, “*this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men.*” Can we find righteousness by marrying well or becoming parents to godly children? Those things remind us of our sin more than our sainthood!

2 Corinthians 5:21 is the key – “*For our sake He (God) made Him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.*” This is not a righteousness that we attain by being good enough or doing enough good things. This righteousness comes from someone else. Jesus gave Himself to death on the cross so that this great exchange would happen: His perfect record of sinlessness would cover the sins of His people, and we would give Him our records of sin for Him to atone for and pay the penalty for. And, unlike Zechariah, there is no reason to doubt. James 1:6b-8: “*for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.*”

⁵ Jennifer Weitz’s blog post “Half Agony, Half Hope” found at <https://unexpectedrealities.com/half-agony-half-hope/>

Remember, Luke has written this gospel to give us assurance, these things are written so that we would know the truth of God's plan of salvation for us.

One of the things that John would be doing, going back to verse 17, was making *"ready for the Lord a people prepared."* And that's what Advent is about: making God's people ready for His arrival. This is the first Sunday of Advent, you have less than a month until Christmas Day. God is calling for your attention, asking you to think deeply about the gift of His Son in this world and in your life. We are all going to get a bit lost in the busy-ness of buying gifts, decorating, doing our Christmas traditions. Maybe this year will have a little less hustle and bustle without all the big parties. In some ways, it's sad that we won't spend as much time with other people. In other ways, it's a gift that can give you more time to spend with the Lord, soaking your soul with the joy and profound meaning of Christ's birth. Amen.

Benediction

1 Kings 8:57-58

"The Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers. May He not leave us or forsake us, that He may incline our hearts to Him, to walk in all His ways and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His rules, which He commanded to our fathers."