



Luke 1:5-25

“The Other Miracle Baby” (2nd in a series on Luke’s Gospel)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIA, LUKE 1:5-25 "THE OTHER MIRACLE CHILD"

Impediments

Birth Events Are Prelude, Herod The Great 37-4B.C.

1) vv.5-7 ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH: PRIESTLY, RIGHTEOUS, OLD AND BARREN.	
	1) v.5 Characters, 2) v.6 Character, 3) v.7 Circumstances
5	And it happened "in the days of" Herod, king of Judea, 23:27-28, Clear Dating, Move To Semitic Style From 1:1-4 there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah; 8/24, Chr. 24:1-19 and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth./ Unknowns, Begins With Jewish Politics/Piety
6	And they were both righteous before God, //I Sam. 1:1-2, Gen. 18:11, Credential: Lineage/Piety
Barren	walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless./Gen. 17:1, Age Honored, Best Of Judaism, 2:25
7	But they had no child, Dt. 7:14, Is. 47:9, Barrenness Not Due To Sin In This Case
Old	because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. Ancient Understanding, Dt. 28:4,11, Hopeless Sorrow //Isaac (Gen. 17-18), Samuel (1 Sam. 1-2), Move From Years/Days/Hours/Moment Of Revelation

2) vv.8-23 ANNUNCIATION BY GABRIEL, ZECHARIAH'S DOUBT/JUDGMENT.

Type = Angelic, Saving Birth//O.T.

a) vv.8-10 Zechariah's Temple Service Begins/ People Outside Praying

Emphasis On Providence

8	It happened while he was serving as a priest before God when his division was on duty, 24 Groups, Ex. 30:1-2
9	according to the custom of the priesthood, + Whole Burnt Offering For Sin, m. Tamid 5:2-6:3
Odds	it fell on him <i>by lot</i> to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. Last Act, Holy Place, 2x Daily, Acts 1:26
10	And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. Faithful People, Ps. 141 Prayer: Setting For Divine Intrusion

b) vv.11-12 Unidentified Angel Appears/ Zechariah is Fearful.

We See Inside

11	And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing at the right side of the altar of incense.
12	And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and a great fear fell upon him. //Dan. 9:20-27, 10:15

c) v.13 Conception Announced to Zechariah.

Gen. 17:19, I Sam. 1:3, 17

13	And the angel said to him, Not Just Child But A Prophet, Destiny Beyond Family "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, God Speaks, 18:7-8, Acts 1:14,4:2,10:31 and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John (gift of God). Corporate Prophet To Israel
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d) vv.14-17 Gabriel Proclaims John's Significance: 3 Stanzas. 9 ands

14	S1a	And you will have joy and gladness,/ and many (all) will rejoice at his birth,/ AND HE WILL BE GREAT BEFORE THE LORD.//Jesus Is The Lord, 7:28, Sir. 48:22	God's Providence/Angelic Prophecy Implications For All
15	c	AND HE SHALL DRINK NO WINE OR STRONG DRINK,/ and he will be filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb,/ AND HE WILL TURN MANY OF THE SONS OF ISRAEL TO THE LORD THEIR GOD.//	7:33, 1 Sam. 1:11, Lev. 10:9, Num. 6:3 1:39-45, Jer. 1:5
16	c	AND HE WILL GO BEFORE HIM IN THE SPIRIT AND POWER OF ELIJAH,/ and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and (turn) the disobedient to the wisdom of the just,/ TO MAKE READY FOR THE LORD A PEOPLE PREPARED.// Lord =Jesus, Is. 40:3	Mal. 3:1, 23; 4:5-6, Sir. 48:10 Conversion: Heart Mal. 2:6, Right Living
17	c	AND HE WILL GO BEFORE HIM IN THE SPIRIT AND POWER OF ELIJAH,/ and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and (turn) the disobedient to the wisdom of the just,/ TO MAKE READY FOR THE LORD A PEOPLE PREPARED.// Lord =Jesus, Is. 40:3	John As Prophet/Evangelist, Not Messiah, 1:76, 3:1-6

c') v.18 Conception Questioned by Zechariah.

I am old// I am Gabriel!

18	And Zechariah said to the angel, Gen. 15:8 (Abraham's Question)
Unbelief	"How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."

b') vv.19-20 Angel Identified/ Zechariah is Struck Dumb as a Sign, Acts 13:11.

19	And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel who stand in the presence of God; Dan. 9:21; Tobit. 12:15 and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. = 1:68 God Visits His People
20	And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass, 1:64
Judgment	because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." Trust, Not Prepared!

a') vv.21-23 People Outside Waiting and Wondering/ Zechariah's Service Ended.

21	And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and the wondered at his delay in the temple. Num. 6:24-26
22	And when he came out he could not speak to them, and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple;
23	and he made signs to them and remained dumb./ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

1') vv.24-25 ZECHARIAH & ELIZABETH: PROMISE FULFILLED/ ELIZABETH'S RESPONSE.

24	After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she hid herself saying, Prophecy No. 1 Fulfilled
25	"Thus the Lord has done to me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men." Gen. 30:1

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 1:5-25

The next thought unit (1:5-25) is complex and demonstrates Luke’s sophistication as a narrative theologian. From the technical language of Greek prefaces (1:1-4), the style shifts abruptly to an Old Testament ethos with many direct and indirect references to patriarchs, matriarchs, prophets and temple rituals. We move from Athens to Jerusalem! The terms of inclusion which open and close the paragraph are “In the days of” (v.5) // “After these days,” (v.24); “Elizabeth” (v.5b) // “Elizabeth” (v.24); “the Lord” (v.6b) // “the Lord” (v.25); “they had no child” (v.7) // “take away my reproach” (v.25). The Gospels first hearers were alert to such cues, and Luke has supplied them. The structure of 1:5-25 is an elaborate nine-part concentric structure or chiasm (1-2a-b-c-d-c’-b’-a’-1’) as indicated on the Scripture Sheet (p. 2). At the core in vv.14-17 is Gabriel’s three-stanza prophecy of John’s vocation, and at the center a critical phrase, “and he will be filled with the Spirit from his mother’s womb” (v.15c), indicating John is a prophet from the start. A new voice is to be heard. Themes of divine providence, human faithfulness and weakness, liturgical worship, angels as supernatural messengers, and prayer are prominent. This is dense and carefully formulated material which stands as the hinge between the Old and New Testaments.

While the surface structure is concentric, the model for the story (i.e. its *literary type*) is the Old Testament pattern where an angel appears to announce a saving birth (p.4). The ten parts of the pattern are used in the announcement to Zechariah concerning John and the parallel annunciation to Mary concerning Jesus (1:26-38), thus demonstrating the continuity of God’s actions. Luke’s pattern in his first two chapters is to give us a panel about John, then a parallel panel about Jesus. In each case John’s work is preparatory and Jesus’ work is superior; in other words, John’s work is to “make ready for the Lord (i.e. Jesus) a people prepared” (v.17c). What God did with Hagar and Sarah and Manoah, God now does with an old priest and a young maid. Two boys will change the world and die as martyrs; only one will be raised! That Luke could dictate using multiple patterns and subtle cross references is an indication of great skill. And now that we see the map of the text, a review of content is in order.

Luke begins with a political dating, around 4B.C. at the end Herod the Great’s reign. We then meet the best of Jewish piety, Zechariah and Elizabeth, whose priestly credentials are matched by daily obedience. If anyone is *blameless* before God, they are. But there is an anomaly, something out of place. They have no child, and in those times barrenness was considered a big status issue, even a curse. Their status before God is not matched by their status in the community. They have hole in their hearts.

Twice a year Zechariah’s cohort of 700 was on duty; the 50 needed to carry out special duties were selected by lot. The lot fell on him for a once-in-a-lifetime privilege. He would enter the Holy Place outside the Holy of Holies and spread incense on the altar while the people prayed. It was prayer in action with smoky perfume! This habit of priestly prayer was part of the twice daily sacrifice for sin. Suddenly Gabriel suddenly appeared to the right of the altar. Zechariah was unnerved and undone. After being calmed, the messenger- straight from God’s presence- gave a speech about a long awaited son. So important was the boy that God reserved the naming. The central speech (vv.14-17) is poetic in structure with each third line indicating the prophet’s relation to God: *great before the LORD; turn many... to the LORD their God; make ready for the LORD a people prepared*. But Zechariah, priest and good man that he was, showed lack of trust in asking for a sign with the response that he was sealed off with no hearing or speech for nine months: a long silent retreat. May each minister for whom holy things have become habitual take heed! Upon his return, Elizabeth finds herself pregnant, the miracle being the restoration of lost biological capacity. Dad is incommunicado; mom hides at home. God disturbs life. What’s next?

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I. The Pattern (Genre) Of An Angelophany Of A Saving Birth: Shows Continuity (Talbert, Luke: 18)

“In such a form the emphasis is not on the parent(s) but on the child as the fulfillment of divine promise.”

Component	Old Testament Examples	John the Baptist	Jesus
1. God/angel Appears	Gen. 16:7 (Hagar), 17:1, Judg. 13:3(Manoah)	Luke 1:11	Luke 1:26
2. Immediate reaction	Gen. 17:3	Luke 1:12	Luke 1:29
3. Name of the person	Gen 16:8, 17:5	Luke 1:13	Luke 1:28, 30
4. Reassurance	Gen. 17:4ff.	Luke 1:13	Luke 1:30
5. Birth announcement	Gen. 16:11, 17:16, 19, Judg. 13:3	Luke 1:13	Luke 1:31
6. Name to be given	Gen. 16:11, 17:19	Luke 1:13	Luke 1:31
7. Prediction of destiny	Gen. 16:12, 17:19, 21, Judg. 13:5	Luke 1:14-17	Luke 1:32-33
8. Objection	Gen. 17:17-18 Gen. 15:18, “How am I to know?” Judg. 6:15, “How can I deliver Israel”	Luke 1:18	Luke 1:34
9. Sign of reassurance	Gen. 17:21b, 15:9, Jdg. 6:17ff.	Luke 1:10-20	Luke 1:35-36
10. Response	Gen. 16:13, 17:23, 26:25, 35:14, Judg. 6:24	Luke 1:22-23	Luke 1:38

Insight: Luke’s story is structured by an Old Testament pattern or type which demonstrates that God is doing what God did before, only now with a new twist John is the greatest prophet of the old regime, and Jesus exceeds John at every point. THEREFORE, WE ARE NOW AT THE TIPPING POINT OF THE DIVINE PURPOSE.

II. THE PARALLEL STORIES OF JOHN’S AND JESUS’ CONCEPTION.

B. 1:5-25 Annunciation To Zechariah

B’ 1:26-38 Annunciation To Mary

1. vv.5-7 Time, Characters, Lineage, Status

1. vv.26-27 Time, Characters, Lineage, Status

2. vv.8-23 Annunciation By Gabriel

2. vv.28-37 Annunciation By Gabriel

a. vv.8-10 Zechariah’s Service/ People Outside

a. (No Parallel)

b. vv.11-20 Appearance, Message, Sign _____

b. vv.28-37 Appearance, Message, Sign

1. v.11 Angel appears
2. v.12 Fearful response
3. v.14 Angelic message (4 phrases)
4. vv.14-17 Gabriel’s song proclaims John’s significance
5. v.18 Zechariah’s objection
6. v.19 Angel’s response/authority
v.20 “And behold,” sign of dumbness
7. v.23 Departure

1. v.28 Angel appears
2. v.29 Fearful response
3. vv.30-31 Angelic message (4 phrases)
4. vv.32-33 Gabriel’s song proclaims Jesus’ significance
5. v.34 Mary’s objection
6. v.35 Angel’s response/ Spirit’s authority
vv.36-37, “And behold,” sign of Elizabeth
7. v.38 Departure

a’ vv.21-23 People outside/ Zechariah’s service

a’ v.38 Promise fulfilled, Mary’s response

THE OTHER MIRACLE CHILD

“... to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

The succinct mission of every ordained minister, whatever their gifts and graces.”

L U K E 1 : 1 7 d

The cartoon version of the history of science shows a young Englishman sitting under an apple tree pondering the nature of the universe. When a ripe apple lets loose and bounces off his noggin, an idea pops into the bubble above his head- gravity! So began Newtonian physics, at least in the comic book version.

Every scientist knows Sir Isaac Newton; his laws of motion revolutionized planetary studies in the seventeenth century, but few have heard of Edmund Halley. But if not for Halley, the world might never have learned of Newton. It was Halley who challenged Newton to think through his original notions. He corrected Newton's mathematical errors and prepared geometrical figures to support his discoveries. It was Halley who coaxed Newton to write his *Mathematical Principals of Natural Philosophy*. Not only did Halley supervise the publication, he financed its printing- even though Newton was wealthier and could have paid the costs. Fame came quickly to Newton; Halley received little credit. He did, however, use the same principles to predict the orbit and return of the comet that bears his name- *Halley's Comet*. He cared less about credit and more about advancing the cause.¹

Leonard Bernstein was once asked which was the most difficult instrument to play. He thought a moment, then replied:

"The second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play the second fiddle with enthusiasm- that's a problem. And if we have no second fiddle, we have no harmony."²

What Halley was to Newton, what second fiddle is to first violin: that is what

¹ PreachingToday.com search under “John the Baptist.”

² Found at Sallylloyd-jones.blogspot.com/2007/09.

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Johannan ben Zechariah- known to us as John the Baptist- was to his slightly younger kinsman *Jeshua ben Joseph*- Jesus, son of Joseph.

John was the road sign, Jesus the destination. Jesus is the way; John prepares the way. In John we meet the last Old Testament prophet, but in Jesus we come face to face with the rightful heir who shows up to reclaim God’s people. Both preach the coming kingdom of God, but no miracles are attributed to John. With Jesus the sick are healed, demons cast out, the dead are called to life and nature bends in obedience to his command. With John it’s late in the night; with Jesus a new day dawns. John issues a call to prepare; Jesus introduces what life looks like when God takes charge at ground level.

John’s conception is natural but supernaturally enabled as lost fertility is restored. His mother Elizabeth gives testimony, “Thus the Lord has done for me....” Mary, on the other hand, is a betrothed virgin whose conception is enabled by God the Spirit without the help of a man, what we call *the virgin birth*, though it is -more accurately for Protestants- a *virginal conception* followed by a natural birth.³ John is a choice servant of God, but Jesus is God’s unique Son who owes his human origin to divine action.

John played second fiddle better than it’s ever been played. He stands alongside Mary- the mother of our Lord- as an indispensable figure and testimony to how God’s grace draws us into costly participation. Mary risked her life to give Jesus birth; John cleared a path and gave his head for the right conduct demanded of Israel and her leaders. The message is clear: listen to John the prophet, then turn to God by following Jesus the Son.

The Christmas story as performed in children’s dramas is a blending of the accounts from Matthew and Luke, and much is left out.⁴ We get the wise men and the star from Matthew, angels and shepherds from Luke.⁵ In Luke chapter 1 there is a large block of

³ See Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1982), 19 on the differing readings of Mary’s virginity before, during, and after the birth of Jesus where Catholics and Protestants conflict.

⁴ Two recent popular treatments are Joseph F. Kelly, *The Birth of Jesus According to the Gospels* (Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2008) and his *The Origins of Christmas* (Liturgical Press, 2004).

⁵ Recent critical treatments include Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2007); Geza Vermes, *The Nativity: history & legend* (New York: Doubleday, 2007). On Luke 1:5-25, 57-80 see Raymond Brown, “The Annunciation to Zechariah, the Birth of the Baptist, and the Benedictus,” *Worship*, November 1998, 482-496.

material about the conception and birth of John that is rarely considered in the rush to Bethlehem.⁶ I call it *the other birth story*. God is about to make a major move of self-revelation; the Savior is soon to come and a prophet is needed to prepare the people. But it takes time to grow a prophet. An old, childless couple will do just perfectly, and here we get the picture that big moves of God are never rushed because this God has the power and wisdom to shape events from within history, then name for which is *divine providence*.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

The Annunciation To Zechariah Concerning John (1:5-25).

The church’s teaching of divine providence- which is the hand of God shaping history- is that it’s mostly invisible. Rulers rule, the rituals of religion go on, day follows day, but then there is a turning point with the God who redirects history. The invisible world intrudes into normal consciousness; we have a sense of being addressed. The challenge is to stay faithful in the times of God’s seeming absence, then pay close attention when new light comes.

Here is my formula for walking with God, not because I like formulas, but it’s compatible with Scripture and makes sense of my history. Here it is: first, take your current location seriously as your duty station. Where you are is no accident. However God leads you, *this* is where it starts! Then stay at your duties, stay in prayer, stay in Scripture, stay in the church, stay on track unless otherwise directed. Stay alert and open to divine surprises. Turn boredom into creative waiting. God knows where you are! Stay faithful.

The God we serve has no problem getting our attention. God can rock your world or give a nudge at any time. There are angels, revelation in dreams and visions; there is divine speaking in Scripture, unbidden prophecy, surprise opportunities and divine appointments. God gives new desires within so you want to do what God opens up. I often pray, “Here I am, Lord, and until you interrupt me- which I welcome, I will keep doing the things you’ve given me to do.” In other words, *obey current orders till new orders arrive*. Be a good soldier! Do your duties with an eye to your commanding officer! The character and practices we develop in ordinary times prepare us for new assignments in the workings of the kingdom. This is the way I seek to live and the way I encourage you to live as well. Just because nothing much is happening does not mean nothing much is happening! It’s the way Zechariah and Elizabeth lived for decades. Long marriage, good resumes, deep faith, and a big ache in their hearts. Every new child in the village made them wonder, Is God mad at us? Faith and obedience had not brought what they most desired, but it made them a certain

⁶ Luke 1:5-25 is ignored in all the major Western lectionaries. See the chart at www.textweek.com/luke for a comparison. Why is this when Luke gives it prominence?

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kind of people, a couple to be trusted with Jesus's best man. Walking with God is its own reward with no guarantee God must deliver our dreams. Our deepest longings, the ones for beauty without ugliness and communication without misunderstanding and joy without pain, cannot be fully satisfied in this life.

Her biological clock stopped ticking decades ago; Elizabeth lived with the pain and shame of barrenness- which in that culture was a heavy burden. It's not how she planned her life as a young bride. In the understanding of the day, the wombs of women were the passive incubators of male seed. The man placed the child there in total, much as you plant a seed of corn in the spring earth. That the woman contributed half the genetic material was not understood til modern times.⁷ This is why barrenness was typically blamed on women. If no child, it must be the incubator! We know that- biologically speaking- it could just as easily been Zechariah's problem. But better Elizabeth with no children than another wife with offspring. Children are a good outcome of marriage, but children do not make a marriage valid.⁸ Procreation is a purpose of marriage, but not the only purpose.

Our old friends prayed and searched for an answer to their empty arms, no doubt tried every home remedy, and finally quit praying when biology said time was up. There would be no more priests of Israel from this dead branch of Aaron's ancient tree. That it did not make them bitter but better is a testimony to God's sustaining grace. They were *blameless*, says Luke in verse 6, tested and proven. Both were of priestly lineage with Zechariah a member of the eighth of twenty-four companies who served the Jerusalem temple twice a year for a week. With seven hundred priests in the division of Abijah, there was slim chance he'd ever be chosen to burn the incense within the holy place just outside the Holy of Holies into which only the chief priest might enter, then only once a year on the Day of Atonement.

In presenting this couple, Luke portrays them as the best of Judaism. Verse 6: "And they were *both* righteous before God, walking in *all* the commandments and ordinances of the Lord *blameless*." A godly couple in every way. But the one thing they most wanted was denied them. To be barren was considered a loss of God's favor, perhaps due to their or their ancestors' sin. Others nursed newborns, never Elizabeth. Other men saw sons circumcised

⁷ Anton Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723) with homemade lens magnified 300 fold. See the history at http://heart.sdsu.edu/~website/Biology_307/Lectures/pdfs/20_sperm.pdf.

⁸ The U.M. Social Principles make this clear, Para. 161.B, "We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman. *We believe that God's blessing rests upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union* (ital. ad.) ..." (*The Book of Discipline 2008*, 102).

into the covenant, not Zechariah. Their lives were rightly ordered before God, but there was pain, long pain, old pain. But something was about to happen that would forever change their perspective. Years of grief would now be seen as decades of preparation. They were not neglected but saved for a mission, about to be caught up in events that would lead to the coming of the Messiah. Staying faithful to God and one another, bearing pain and disappointment: this was God's customized curriculum for Elizabeth and Zechariah.

In our culture we tend to emphasize God's dealings with individuals, but here the model is marital, God working with a couple for the sake of the whole people of God. All marriages need to ask, "You used Elizabeth and Zechariah, *what is your purpose for us?*" All singles need to know that both John and Jesus were unmarried and able to follow God's call without the burden of a family. Both married and singles are caught in God's saving purposes, and the church honors both. The first question is not, Are you married? or, Are you single? It's, Are you caught up in the purposes of God right where you are?

All his adult life Zechariah had been a priest, twice yearly making the journey to Jerusalem, but this time there was a surprise. His name was drawn to burn incense in the Holy Place, an honor which might come to a rank-and-file priest once in a lifetime. While the sacrificial animal burned outside on the altar for the sin offering, he would enter to burn incense which would rise as prayer before the Lord as the people prayed outside.⁹ This ritual was repeated daily at sunrise and again at 3:00 in the afternoon in fulfillment of God's command to Moses. Zechariah saw this as the climax of his ministry, but it was- in fact- a doorway to a larger call, that of the father of Israel's last great prophet. When others are retiring, mature Christians should be open to the most important work of their lives.¹⁰ You may retire from earning a living, but you never retire from following God.

Throughout Luke and Acts prayer is the context for religious experience. It is in communicating to God in public and private prayer that we open ourselves to divine intrusions. It was in the context of the daily temple liturgy that Gabriel appeared. It was after prayer that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism.¹¹ It was after ten days of prayer that the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost.¹² It was while going up to the temple for the

⁹ Psalm 141.

¹⁰ Go to www.finishers.org for a missions movement for retirees!

¹¹ 3:21-22.

¹² Acts 2:1-21.

afternoon sacrifice and prayer that Peter and John healed the paralytic.¹³ It was during a season of prayer and fasting that the Holy Spirit set apart Paul and Barnabas for missions.¹⁴ Prayer is the place we wait on God, sing our praise, confess our sin, make our petitions, and listen in silence. We do not seek extraordinary experiences for their own sake, but we know from Scripture that God grants them from time to time. Prayer is the laboratory where religious experience is nurtured, the place where we develop an appetite and tolerance for God. God always hears, but sometimes the answers are delayed.

By God's ordering of the priestly divisions and of the lot, Zechariah was at the right place at the right time for a divine appointment.¹⁵ The veil opens, and there's Gabriel, standing at the right of the incense altar, a sign of favor. "Now is the time," the Lord said to Gabriel, "pull back the veil, but don't scare him too badly. Remember, he's an old man, one of my faithful servants. The boy he raises prepares the way for *You Know Who!*"

Verse 12: "And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and a great fear fell upon him." You would be too. Adrenalin poured into his bloodstream, mouth dry as cotton, mind reeling. The ritual of the temple gave way to an encounter between the two worlds. It was not in the bulletin. While praying for the people of Israel with the symbol of incense, Zechariah received an angelic visitation and new assignment. Stuff happens in church!

By the way- and in case you were wondering, angels do not cease to be in the presence of God when they become visible. They have, as it were, two faces, always beholding God while temporarily engaging us.¹⁶ Angels step down the voltage of God's holy presence for human consumption. They are heaven's postal carriers.

A careful reading shows that the word from God was a prophecy in four parts:

- 1) "Do not be afraid, Zechariah,
- 2) for your prayer is heard,
- 3) and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son,
- 4) and you shall call his name John."

¹³ Acts 3:1-10.

¹⁴ Acts 13:1-3.

¹⁵ For a fresh and counter-intuitive reading of foreknowledge and providence, see William A. Demski, *The End of Christianity: Finding A Good God In An Evil World* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2009).

¹⁶ Peter Kreeft, *Angels and Demons* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1995), 93-94.

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The key phrase here is not the command not to fear or the promise of a child and his name. It's the second part, "for your prayer is heard."

Think of all the things you've prayed for with sincere desire, then forgotten. But God has not. Your prayers *are* heard (present tense); they echo in God's ears. This is the foundation of praying, not just speaking words into the air, but believing God uses our prayers for good purposes. That the angel had to remind Zechariah is a caution that one of the peculiar sins of clergy is to be so familiar with the forms of prayer that we cease to believe God actually listens and responds. Prayer is reduced to some baser purpose such as giving the people their weekly dose of holy language or another therapeutic technique.

I pray with people all the time, and when something happens, sometimes even immediately, I'm a little surprised. Prayer is a dialog with the living God, and when God chooses to stop listening and start acting (whether through prophecy, or dreams, or angels, or visions, or voices, or circumstances, or personalized Scripture, or any of the other biblical means), the result is deeply disturbing, as Zechariah found out. Temple ritual suddenly opened into encounter. The one whose presence was behind the heavy, high curtain in the Holy of Holies stepped out and into Zechariah's presence through the ministry of the highest of the holy angels, Gabriel, *the angel of the Lord*. A big, bad warrior angel!

This was more than just a personal blessing for an old couple, through it was surely that. Their son John would be a Spirit-filled prophet of God to bring renewal through the offer of repentance to Israel. John was marked from the womb with divine call, filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb, so don't tell me pre-borns can't do business with God.

Those in our day who are hesitant about the baptism of the children of believers and whether or not God can indeed regenerate infants need to meditate on the central verse of this scene, "...and he shall be filled with the Spirit, *even from his mother's womb*." That says something about the place of children in the family of faith and also something about the personhood of the unborn. The Bible treats the pre-born as persons capable of profound interaction with their Creator, not as potential somebodies who may be sliced and diced and extracted by suction for convenience sake. How many prophets never made it to birth? Have grown deaf to God? We ask, How could our ancestors wink at slavery? Our grandchildren will ask, Why so many innocents gone? What would John the Baptist say were he to reappear? Would he shame the pastors for our moral and theological cowardice? Would he call us to the desert for a good thrashing? Yes, I believe so.

I know you don't like it when I name our modern sins. I don't either, but I am not here to make you happy. I am here by appointment, not popularity poll, and our only future is to follow after God with all our hearts, no matter the obsessions and fashions of our self-indulgent American culture which has lost all moral language except the language of

individual choice. What poverty of mind!

Zechariah, Elizabeth and all their village friends rejoiced at the amazing birth; for years afterward John was a delight to them both. But the day came when John launched out, not as the priest his lineage prepared him for, but as a prophet preaching repentance in the barren wilderness as the crowds flooded out of Jerusalem in his direction. When God wanted to prepare the final prophet, he placed him in a pious, Jewish home where he took in the faith of Israel with his mother's milk. What if such is already in one of our homes. Forty years in the future they say to a crowd, "I was raised at Main Street Church. My parents were faithful Christians." You think I'm kidding? I am not. We need prophets who pour salt into open wounds, not just pastors with oil and bandages and sappy smiles.

Be careful, parents. In teaching Christian faith to your children you are not primarily preparing them to fulfill your dreams or the American dream but to know enough of God to respond to a call. The only son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, John the Baptist, had his head cut off for an exotic dancer; the first son of Mary and Joseph was nailed naked and writhing to a tree between two Jewish terrorists. Baptism, the sacrament of giving our children to Christ, is to open them to a future far beyond our reach which may involve suffering for God, even martyrdom. The baptism of the children of Christian parents is not a cute little ritual. It is vowing to God, "Do with them as you will! We will be their parents; you be their God!"

It is not just with us but with the Lord that our children have to deal, and a pious, faithful home is the best preparation. The message for children is that God is the center of the universe, not them, not their parents. Before ever conceived, Gabriel makes the centrality of the Lord God clear in John's life, "And he will be great *before the Lord*.... And he will turn many of the sons of Israel *to the Lord their God*.... to make *ready for the Lord* a people prepared." John spoke to crowds, but he lived before an audience of One. Are you raising your child for a destiny? How will they know God and find strength to resist the crushing pressures of our culture for easy conformity? That is the parenting question that needs to be asked. Not, How does my child achieve success and give me grandchildren that live close by? Where do you think our own John and Charles Wesley came from? Why did they shake England? Because their parents were utterly immersed in the Scripture and the faith.¹⁷ And when God called them both in 1738 to new faith, they were prepared. So when a parent asks me, "Is it on video?" I want to cry, "No. And if it's not in your life, video won't help!"

One of the hallmarks of John's future is that he would, in the words of the prophet Malachi, "turn the hearts of the fathers to their children." When one in four white children

¹⁷ For a winsome read on the Wesley home, see J. Ellsworth Kallas, *Being United Methodist: What It Means, Why It Matters* (Nashville: Abington, 2012), Chapters 1-4.

and two in three black kids are born without fathers who are also husbands, we need another John to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and away from treating women as disposable body parts and *baby-mommas*.¹⁸ When one of the greatest social problems is dads who don't pay child support, we need John the Baptist. Men are confused in our day. We are consumed by jobs and television and sports and addictions and porn and trivia and don't know how to walk with God, love our wives, develop deep friendships, show self-control, protect the weak, and pour godly values into our children. That is the root of gang problems-absent fathers. That is why teenage girls get in bed with the first boy that shows them attention-absent fathers. Our jails jammed with angry young men because of absent fathers. Masculinity is not about your biceps or an abdominal six pack or the notches on your belt or how many toys in your garage or who your sports heroes are or how much money and success you accumulate or how many antlers are on your wall. Masculinity in our culture has been reduced to trivia. How stupid is that? Sanctified masculinity is about learning to walk with God and become a man of deep integrity with all your powers and dreams submitted to Jesus Christ. This is the new frontier, and it can only come through an awakened church.¹⁹

There is a great *father hunger* in America.²⁰ In most every counseling setting, the key question is, "Tell me about your father." We need the ministry of John the Baptist to be restored to the church. Before there can be a moral renaissance in the culture, there must be a revival of dads and men in the church. One of the surest signs of that is when the Holy Spirit starts awakening men to their accountability before God and their responsibility to their children. When men run to weep at the altar of this church and don't care who's looking, there will be hope for Main Street and Greenwood. My prayer is that God interrupt the lives of us men and shake us loose from our complacency. As the old, neglected hymn bids us, "Rise up, O men of God, have done with lesser things, give heart and mind and soul and strength to serve the king of kings."²¹ Wake up! The culture's definition of what it is to be a man is not working, and it's not working because it's wrong and destructive, abusive of women and neglectful of children. The current script is not written by our Lord.

¹⁸ Two recent treatments on cohabitation are Glenn T. Stanton, *The Ring Makes All The Difference* (Chicago: Moody, 2011); Mike & Harriett McManus, *Living Together: Myths, Risks & Rewards* (New York: Howard, 2008). They make the case against it.

¹⁹ For a book worth reading on the journey to authentic, fruitful manhood, see David Murrow, *The Map: The Way of All Great Men* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2010); also Kenny Luck, *Sleeping Giant: No Movement Of God Without Men Of God* (Nashville: B & H, 2012); Wes Yoder, *Bond Of Brothers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

²⁰ See David Stoop, *Making Peace With Your Father* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2004).

²¹ *The UM Hymnal*, No. 576.

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Zechariah was dumbfounded. There he stood, looking at the invisible and being asked to believe the impossible. And though he was a righteous man, blameless in obedience, he-like many professional clergy- struggled with unbelief, so he asked for a sign, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years," which is- when examined- an accusation against God. "I want evidence, not just a promise."

It's one thing to carry out your religious duties and keep the rules but quite another thing to do business with God personally. When Mary asked for a similar sign, it was given. But as a priest Zechariah had a higher level of accountability. He said, "I am old;" to which Gabriel said, "Yes, and I am Gabriel who stand *in the presence of God*. Age is not a problem, but your lack of trust is."

Zechariah receives a sign alright, a sign of judgment. For nine months he will be unable to hear or speak.²² A long silent retreat. In his encounter Zechariah experienced both sides of God's grace, blessing *and* judgment. He would sire the last prophet and for nine months not hear or say a word. Those whom God uses greatly God also judges deeply, and the judgment is a customized as the blessing. God heard his prayer; God also judged Zechariah's unbelief and made of him a public spectacle. God is great and God is good, but God is never safe. So if one Sunday I open my mouth and nothing comes out, don't fire me. Wait for the judgment of God to be lifted. Something good may come out of the silence!

When Zechariah walked out of the temple he was expected to pronounce Aaron's ancient blessing over the crowds. Not a word. He tried sign language. Everyone knew something had happened. That is one of the marks of true religious experience. You don't have to broadcast it. It shows; no one can do business with God and remained unmarked. Zechariah finished his duties and went home, silent as a post. Perhaps he smiled at Elizabeth, one finger pointed to heaven, the other at her abdomen! "O No," she thought, "he's lost it now!" He then lip-synced that great Hebrew love song, "Hey, hey, baby. I wanna' know, if you'll be my girl." And then, in a few weeks, the signs where there.

The next voice we hear is not Zechariah but of an older woman with crows feet round her eyes. She places a hand on her swelling abdomen and chuckles in private, verse 24: "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men." There is humor here. A priest with his ears and mouth shut; a woman of advanced years with her womb opened. Nine months of waiting for the next part of the prophecy to be fulfilled. That's how it is with God. Long periods of ordinariness- living with what the Lord has given in judgment and blessing- interrupted by divine surprises that are

²² Darrell Bock, *Luke: Baker Exegetical Commentary On The NT* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 92, notes that the hand signs used in 1:62 indicate deafness as well.

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not on our timetable or under our control. Christian maturity is learning to live with the unspectacular routines of faithfulness where we log so many uneventful hours and at the same time believing God is guiding the process and may break in with a fresh word at any moment. God’s providence is found in the long, straight paths as well as the sharp, unexpected turns. The hand of providence is ever at work, and we are invited to be participants in whatever God is up to in our day.

CONCLUSION

God hears prayers, even prayers we long since gave up on. Yes, God can use old people and those whose weakness confounds the world. Yes, it is important to attend to your religious duties and to be faithful in your obedience. Yes, God does call couples and singles to share in divine assignments. Yes, God can grant extraordinary personal blessings even as God's works larger purposes. Yes, angels are real and constantly carrying out missions from heaven. Yes, God can interrupt a service of worship with a manifestation of divine power. Yes, God can grant children to the childless. Yes, children can do business with God in the womb. Yes, God does want to shake men loose from their habits and toys to know Christ and serve their families. Yes, preachers can come under embarrassing public judgment because of private unbelief. Yes, God claims the right to move our children into ways we would never chose for them. Yes, most of our discipleship is lived in the valleys of ordinariness and not on mountaintops of divine encounter. And Yes, we do need in the church and for the sake of the nation, a restoration of the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist to make us *a people prepared*. Yes, Lord. I believe it all. Help us!

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