

Preparing the Way of the Lord: Birth

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

November 30, 2025 – AM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

Luke 1:5-25, 57-66

As I read the beginning of this story and I hear how Luke describes Zechariah and Elizabeth, I get a kind of picture forming in my mind. In verse 6, Luke says, “both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly,” and when Luke says that I feel like I can see this couple.

I picture two people whose lives are well-ordered and reliable. They have a little house not far from the temple, and it’s immaculate. Not having children, both of them have used a lot of their energy on their home, especially in the garden. Zechariah paints the white picket fence every year and spends hours in the yard. Elizabeth does all the roses and the hydrangeas; the lawn is Zechariah’s baby. Every blade of grass is green, the edging is perfect, and there is not a weed to be seen. They are great neighbors. Every June their street has a picnic for the residents and they always go. Elizabeth makes her banana bread. A couple of years ago she said to Zechariah that maybe this year she would make lemon squares instead, but she could tell by the look on his face that he didn’t want lemon squares; he liked the banana bread. He’s a creature of routine.

Part of their routine was dinner. Every night they would sit down in their tidy kitchen for the evening meal. Zechariah would reach across the table and take hold of his wife’s hand: “Lord Thank you for our life. Thank you for your goodness. Thank you for your promises. Bless this food, and Lord, if it is your will, please give us a child.”

Zechariah’s love of routine made him a great priest! Everyone down at the temple loved him. Zechariah was a real professional! You knew exactly what to expect from him. If you made him chair of a committee, everything was done decently and in good order, no surprises. He knew the Torah inside and out. He could recite the ten commandments by heart. He was a Biblical expert: he knew all the small details, all the nuances of the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Elijah and Elisha, Samuel, David.

The other priests loved and respected Zechariah, so they were genuinely happy for him when he was chosen by lot to make the burnt offering of incense in the temple. This was a big deal - a once in a lifetime opportunity. There were 24 orders of priests in those days and many priests in each order, so your chance of being chosen for the offering was small. Because he was chosen Zechariah, would be able to go further into the temple than he ever had before – right into the Most Holy Place! There was only one holier place in the temple: the Holy of Holies - the inner sanctum where the ark of the covenant was kept. The earthly throne room of Yahweh, the living God. Only the High Priest could go there, and only once a year for the day of atonement. Zechariah would never again in his life be closer to the presence of the living God.

He had thoroughly prepared for the big day. He’d memorized the proper procedure. He’d memorized the words of the liturgy. He’d attended to all the details because he didn’t want any surprises. But when the day arrived, it was all surprise. Zechariah’s careful plans go out the window. Inside the most holy place, standing by the altar of incense, there is an angel. Zechariah is gripped with fear. And no wonder, it’s Gabriel who stands in the presence of God! Gabriel has a message: “Do not be afraid Zechariah! Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth is to bear a son, and you are to call him John.”

How does Zechariah react to the angel’s word? He doubts it. He doesn’t believe the angel. “How can this be!?”, he says. “This can’t be. Elizabeth and I are too old.”

Let’s just stop for a moment and reflect on Zechariah’s response. He doesn’t believe the angel. Of all people, shouldn’t Zechariah be the one who would believe the angel? Of all people, shouldn’t Zechariah believe that God would be able to do what Gabriel said he would do?! After all, Zechariah, knew the old stories of God giving miracle children to old people. How many times had he preached on Isaac’s miraculous

birth to Abraham, or Samson's miraculous birth to his old parents. Zechariah ought to know that giving miraculous babies is kind of what God does. Didn't he believe his own sermons?

And furthermore, think of where Zechariah is standing when the promise is given. He's in the Most Holy Place! He's standing right next to God's earthly throne room, a place live with the power of the God. You would think that a priest standing in that Holy Place, would expect God to move in some way. Like he might expect some sort of display of God's power. But even in the Most Holy Place, Zechariah seems to have no expectation that God will show up.

And hasn't Zechariah been praying for this!? He and Elizabeth have been praying for a child their whole life!? Why would they pray if they didn't have some expectation that God would actually answer their prayer?! And yet when the angel shows up and says, "Your prayers have been answered," Zechariah says, "I don't believe you." How come he's praying for something he didn't believe was possible?

Do people do that? Do they ask God for things, do they ask for things in prayer, without really expecting anything to happen? Do they tell stories of the mighty acts of God without expecting God to do anything mighty? Yes, they do. Of course they do. People do this all the time. In Zechariah we see this good person who had a carefully ordered world of religious duties and careful theology, committee meetings and daily routine, but he didn't expect God would ever break into that world. There are lots of people like that. Good people, nice people, who come to church every Sunday, they give their 10%, they serve on committees, they send their kids to Christian schools, they tell Bible stories of God's mighty acts to the next generation. According to the commandments and regulations of God, according to the duties of faith and the routines of faith, they are as righteous and blameless as people can be. And yet they expect very little from God.

Are we sometimes among those people? Every week we dutifully bow our heads for our pastoral prayer. We ask God to heal the diseases of people we love, we ask God to end wars, we ask God to end poverty, we pray 'come quickly Lord Jesus,' but do we always expect God to act powerfully on behalf of these prayers, or do we sometimes cycle through these requests as a kind of routine, a kind of duty, because these are the things you pray for in a pastoral prayer. I think there are lots of times in our life when we are like Zechariah. We're good people, doing our duty, following the rules, doing the church things, but not really expecting God to show up in our lives.

So how does God handle good, faithful people, whose faith has lost its expectation? What does God do with us when we lose our sense of expectation? Well, what does God do with Zechariah? I have good news and bad news. The good news is God sticks with Zechariah. God blesses him in spite of his unbelief. God still makes Elizabeth pregnant. God doesn't need Zechariah's faith; God doesn't need Zechariah's expectation to accomplish his work. God still delivers what the angel promised. God continues to make the preparations for the world-changing arrival of his Son. Even when we are unexpectant, God's goodness keeps flowing towards his people. That's grace and that's good news.

Here's the bad news: The other thing God does for the unexpectant priest is afflict him. God makes Zechariah mute and deaf. He is unable to hear or speak for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy. God forces Zechariah to keep silence. What a perfect punishment for a preacher. I'm sure there are people here who have hoped for just such an affliction for your preachers once in a while. In fact, this punishment is so perfect for the priest, it's clear that it's not simply a punishment at all. For Zechariah, and sometimes for us too, God's affliction is a school for sanctification. He's enrolling Zechariah in 9 months of training; he's offering him a continuing education program. In fact, you might say God gives Zechariah a mandatory nine-month sabbatical.

How is the sabbatical going to teach Zechariah? Well, when you take away a preacher's voice, it's like taking away a carpenter's toolbox, it's like taking away a cook's stove, it's like taking away a painter's brushes. When you take away a preacher's voice you take away his main tool and now he can't do his job. You force him to stop doing and start watching.

Which is exactly the point. Zechariah has been all busy doing for God, Zechariah has been all theology and routine, now he will be forced to watch to see what the living God will do for him. In this silence God is

saying to Zechariah, "Hush now child! No more sermons. No more prayers. Sit still for a moment and watch what I will do in this world. It will be more than you expect. It will be more than you ask or imagine."

You see God's disciplinary purpose in verse 20: "You will not be able to speak until the day this happens." which is just another way of saying, "Until you see that I'm a God who does things!! Until you learn to expect again." Zechariah is spiritually ailing, and silence is just what the doctor ordered. God uses this affliction to teach Zechariah, to shape his soul, to teach him to expect again.

Does God sometimes use affliction to wake us up and teach us to expect again. Yes. Absolutely. I want to be clear: not all affliction is from God. Much of it is just pain and misery – part of the result of sin and evil in this world. Even in that kind of pain, God is present and he is working for your good. But there are times when, just as we see in this story, the affliction we suffer leads us into a new place of faith and hope and expectation. I am willing to bet that many of you have had a season of struggle in your life that was terrible when you were going through it, but now you look back on it and you see how God used it to make you stronger, better, more hopeful, more alive to his presence.

Does his sabbatical change Zechariah? Does the Lord's continuing education program have its desired effect? Yes, it does. By the end of the story, Elizabeth isn't the only one expecting. It seems like everyone who heard about John's birth had their eyes opened: "All the neighbors were filled with awe;" everyone wondered, "what is this child going to be!? For the Lord's hand was with him." People are suddenly opened up to the future: Wow! Look what God did! I wonder what he will do next!!!???

As for Zechariah, when his sabbatical ends, he is changed. His doubt has turned into a song. We didn't read that song - you can find it right after our passage. And if you read it, you will see that it is a song about a living God who never stops doing wonderful things in the lives of his people. It's a song about how the tender mercies of the Lord will break forth "to shine upon those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the path of peace."

Full Christian faith is expectant faith. It doesn't just believe doctrines, and do good deeds, full faith has its eyes and its heart open. Full Christian faith expects that the living God will work and act in our world and in our lives. Years ago we were visiting my brother's cottage in Canada, and for church we went to the Sunday service at the Anglican church in Perth, Ontario. The service was an ordinary Anglican service, but at the end of the service they asked a couple of members of the congregation to stand up and describe their participation in a discipleship course that the Anglican Church in Ontario was offering to its members. It's a course meant to deepen their knowledge of God and their relationship with him. One of the men got up there and in a quiet humble way, told us that he really felt as though this course had made a tremendous change in his faith life. He said, "I used to be a person who went through the motions in my faith. I was raised a Christian, and I believed in God, and I expressed that by going to church every Sunday and giving and saying my prayers at mealtimes. My faith was routine. What I learned in this course changed my sense of God. Now he's a partner in my life. Now when I get up in the morning, I look up to God and I say, "OK Lord, where are we going today? What do you have in store for me today?""

The man learned to expect the living God every day. Does that seem like a small change? It's not. It's fundamental. It changes the way you walk through your world. It changes obstacles into opportunities and duties into adventures.

Advent is the season of expectations. This advent, I pray that the Lord will enlarge my expectations. I pray that he will enlarge my sense of what he's doing in me. What he's doing in the church. What he's doing in my family. What he can do in that building next door. What he can do through each of you. What he can do through all of us together. I pray that he will help me meet every day saying, "OK Lord, what are we going to do today?" I pray the same for you.

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