

Title: Good News for an Old Man
Text: Luke 1.5-25
Theme: This was no ordinary time.
Series: Advent 2008 #1
Prop Stmt. The good news is that God remembers his promises.

Read Text: Luke 1.1-25

The Christmas holiday brings out a number of traditions. (plasticville church - pics) The sights and sounds and smells of Christmas remind us of things from the past. Traditions, if they are good, can be a great method of teaching. We have some traditions here at Cornerstone. We are careful to distinguish between what is a biblical mandate, and what is a tradition. But, one of our traditions is setting aside the 4 Sundays before Christmas as the Advent Sundays. Advent means coming. Celebrating Advent, simply means, that we seek to prepare ourselves for Christmas (the celebration of his first coming) in a way that we are looking forward to and getting ready for His return (2nd Advent). As part of that preparation, I preach a series of messages and encourage families to celebrate advent at home. Hand-outs that explain that are available at the Guest Services desk and are also posted on our web-site. The lighting of the candles are designed to illustrate how God, in preparing the world for the Light of the World, sent His Word first to the prophets, then to the angels, then to the shepherds and then to the Wise Men. Finally, on Christmas Eve, we light the 5th candle representing the birth of the Light of the World. This year's sermon series is from what I consider to be the lost chapter in the Christmas story. It is not lost in the sense that no one knows it is there, but it is lost in the sense that it is often ignored. My prayer is that this year's study of Luke 1 will be used by God to provide your heart with fresh sights, sounds, smells and savors of Christ, so that your love for Him and your longing for Him will be greatly increased.

Before Luke 2 comes Luke 1. In the re-telling of the Christmas event, Luke 1 is often overlooked. But, these 80 verses are a critical part of the story. From the very beginning of this gospel account, you can see why the Spirit of God directed Luke to write an account of the life of Christ. Luke – a gentile, writes about forgotten people, highlights 2 women, records their songs of praise, tells of 2 births of unusual children, pregnancies were unusual, response, praise, and makes the reader aware that something very unusual and important is about to take place.

The entire Gospel of Luke presents Jesus as the Savior who is reaching out to the lost offering forgiveness. “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” - Luke 19.1-10 The birth of Christ, while amazing, was not mysterious in the sense that he just appeared on the earth. His mother had a family. She was a real person who had real relationships and participated in conversations that were witnessed and remembered. Luke has gone to great pains to demonstrate the authenticity and historicity of these events. All of this sets the stage for his audience (us) the readers, who learn about a “Savior” who actually lived among his people and truly cared for them. Luke shows us that Christ is a Savior who, can converse with Kings, was born into poverty. Here is a

Savior who really cares about people. These events are told with details that authenticate their veracity, because His message is directly woven into His very life.

After a very classic and rather formal introduction (verses 1-5)

1. **The Setting** (5-7)

A. **Historically** – 5a

The scene in verse 5 opens in Jerusalem where Herod is King. Herod's dad, Antipater had done some favors for the Roman government, so in return, his family was given the right to rule in Judea. His position was political for all of the wrong reasons. While used by Rome, he was not Roman. Though ruling in Judea, he was not Jewish. His tenuous position only fueled his legendary paranoia. Of his ten wives, one was the sister of the High Priest, of whom Herod was afraid. So, he killed the High Priest, and then his wife. Fearful that his two oldest sons might try to take the throne, he had them killed. His most bizarre actions seemed to take place toward the end of his life, and the time of this event described in Luke 1 is in the final years of his reign.

B. **Ethnically** – 5b

During this time, there was a priest, named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. As verse 8 points out, this division was one of the groups (there were 24) of priests which were organized by families and divided up for the purpose of taking turns taking care of the responsibilities in the temple. Each of these 24 divisions served for a week at a time, twice a year, in addition to helping out at the major holidays.

C. **Personally** – 6-7

1) **Character**

Here is the summary of a couple, long married and long faithful to God. “upright in the sight of God” is a phrase that means that they were in a good relationship with God's law. It is used to describe some of the most respected people in the Bible, such as: Noah, Daniel, and Job. What an incredible honor to be named in such a list. Here was a couple who were not royalty, nor celebrities, but were faithfully living for God and serving God in a very difficult time in Israel's history. The challenges in Israel were far deeper than the Roman occupation of the land. There was a great deal of pagan unbelief on the part of the people themselves. Coupled with that was the suffocating influence of many of the Pharisees. Herod, the king, was not from the line of David, he was in actuality, an Edomite who was an imposter occupying the throne. In the midst of this messy setting, at Zechariah and Elizabeth were faithful. But they were not the only ones who were faithful.

Zechariah means – God remembers, and Elizabeth means either, “my God is the one by whom I swear” or “my God is my fortune.” I think that it is safe to assume that these

names were given to them by parents who believed that God would remember His people and remember His promises. They may have been dead by this time. Everything they did was by faith in something that they never were given the opportunity to experience in this life-time, but they named their son in hope and apparently raised him in hope. And here he is, living with hope even though he and his wife have no circumstantial evidence for that. Life had not given them what they wanted, and yet, they observed all the Lord's commands and regulations blamelessly.

2) Condition

“But they had no children.” Joining Sara, Hannah and for a time Rebekah, this label brought with it more than the sadness of not having a child. In those days there was the added stigma that this condition was the result of God's disfavor on them. That is why it is all the more important to understand that in spite of how they might have been perceived by others, this couple was faithful. God's plan for them was very, very special, and while they had no idea, they just stayed faithful.

3) Age

The end of verse 7 points out, that they were “well along in years.” The hope of having children was essentially gone. Their faithfulness to God was not driven by a demand to get a child. That dream was virtually over, they served anyway. They lived in view of God's promises. They were faithful in spite of living with the label of being childless. All of this sets us up for the story itself.

2. **The Story** (8-25)

One of the delightful features of Luke's writing is the wonderful attention to detail that he gives. Luke is a Gentile. Early church tradition identified him as a physician, which I assume to be the case. So, even as we read this account, there are at one level a number of writing features that are very interesting. First of all, you have a Gentile who is describing a very Jewish ceremony. Secondly, Luke's account prominently features two women who “were often denigrated in the ancient world and clearly did not have the same status as men.”¹ So, even the way the story is told, and the people who are featured, and of course the writer himself, are all part of the very point of the text. God is fulfilling His promises through Christ. Those promises center upon calling a new people unto himself who are marked by racial inclusion and equality and gender inclusion and equality. Just keep that in mind as part of the backdrop to this text. The event that Luke focuses on in verses 8-9 needs to be seen in view of the fact that due to the high number of priests (18,000), an individual priest would only be able to offer incense at the daily sacrifice once in his life. The daily incense offering was actually twice-daily, once in the morning and once in the evening. Selection for this honor would be done, being “chosen by lot.” Once you did it, you would not be able to do it again. Not every man from the priestly tribe of Levi was privileged to do this. So, this was for a man, born into the tribe a Levi, one of the highest points of his civil/religious life. He was, all by himself, going

¹ See Thomas Schreiner's NT Theology, p. 768 and his footnote.

to carry out the Law of God. (Exodus 30.7-8) The command by God to offer incense was a sacred and therefore serious responsibility. Leviticus 10 tells us the story of two of Aaron's sons (Nadab and Abihu) who ignored God's instructions regarding the incense, and were actually struck down by God and died.

So, let's put this together now. The burning of the incense was a twice-daily event in Jewish life that had been taking place for over 1,400 years (70 year break). It was at once daily, but not mundane. Right here at this climactic moment of Zechariah's life and work as a priest, for which he was literally born, and right here at this very daily moment that was a marker of the regularity of Jewish life, God shows up! God broke into the daily ness of Jewish life to bring his people a message. There, while Zechariah was performing the most important task of his life, an angel of God, (Gabriel, we find out later) appears to him and after assuring him that he is not going to die, (which is a common reassurance that angels usually have to give), announces to Zechariah that he and Elizabeth are going to have a son. Again, the attention that Luke gives to the detail is wonderful. He tells us exactly where the angel appeared – "at the right side of the altar of incense." Keep in mind that no one is supposed to be in that area. Zechariah is not only performing this very sacred ritual, which is highly intensive, but he is doing it all by himself. Angels appearing are a bit startling anyway, much less at this moment.

A. God remembers His promises.

For 400 years, God had not spoken beyond what He had already given in the OT. What He had given in the OT was extremely important. And in fulfillment of what God had already revealed to His people through His servant the prophet, Daniel, God's people were caught in the middle of the grinding cogs of empire building. For 400 years, God's people lived in the midst of shifting political forces. During the inter-testamental (time between the testaments) period, the nation of Israel was like the rag on the tug-of-war rope between the remnants of Alexander the Great's Empire. The Seleucid dynasty and the Ptolemaic dynasty fought each other relentlessly, until the growing Roman empire stepped in and crushed and conquered it all. For tiny Israel, it only meant that a different master was beating them. Where was God? Had He forgotten His promises? Had He forgotten His people? Somebody still believed. Somebody named their son, Zechariah. They did it in faith, but it turned out to be a prophesy. God did remember. He was there and He knew what was going on.

B. God hears.

God remembered Zechariah and Elizabeth in a way that was absolutely stunning. He was going to give them a son. The angel said in v.13, "your prayer has been heard." Was this referring to their prayer for a child? Perhaps, but, I think that it was Zechariah's prayer for the Messiah. I say that based on the fact that there are a number of people who had gathered to pray. That usually happened for the evening offering. My view is that Zechariah, lit the incense, and prayed for the redemption of Israel, since the burning incense illustrated the God-ward direction of all of the activities of the Temple, and since the people were outside praying, it makes sense to me that Zechariah was praying for the

restoration and salvation of his people. Either way, God was answering their prayer in a way that was also fulfilling His part of remembering his promises to all of his people.

Here is an example of a truth that causes my jaw to drop open in wonder. We are commanded by God to pray. And yet, God is Sovereign and is going to do all things according to His eternal counsel and plan. The Scripture presents it like this; because God is Sovereign – pray! Pray gives you an opportunity to be a partner in God’s eternal plan to build a kingdom for His Son. Zechariah and Elizabeth pray, perhaps it has been a life-long prayer for a child, perhaps they were crying out for the Messiah to come. And God not only answers their prayer, but He does so by employing them as strategic partners in fulfilling His promises to send a Messiah for His people and a Savior for the world. A new epoch in God’s eternal plan is about to begin and it all starts with God hearing the prayers of this couple. It is an incredible comfort to know that God hears, because God also responds.

C. **God responds.** (14-25)

1) He responds by speaking. (14-17)

Notice how hopeful this promise is. Not only are you and Elizabeth going to have a son, but you are to name him, John. God’s oversight of this is so perfect and so personal, that He has already picked out the name. But, as many of you already know, naming something implies ownership and rights. In blessing them, God is also informing them, that this boy is God’s and he will perform a very important role in God’s plan. This is seen in the series of the He will statements:

- He will be a joy and a delight
 - o To you
 - o And many will rejoice because of His birth

- He will be great in the sight of the Lord.

He will not be as great as Christ. He is not the Messiah, but his job is to prepare the way and point people to the Messiah. Not too many people can handle the job of second chair.

- He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.

Which is probably why John was never to drink wine for strong drink. He may have been a Nazarite (Numbers 6.1-12), but no mention is made of his hair. I think that this prohibition was part of God’s way of setting him apart from common people. His life was to be radically different because his message of repentance was so important. The result of this will be that many of the people of Israel will be turned back to God.

- He will go on before the Lord (17)

Here, the angel identifies John's style and message with Elijah, but the angel specifically uses the words of the very last verse in the OT to describe this boy. He will turn the hearts

2) He responds by acting decisively for our good. (18-25)

Zechariah is not fully convinced. He asks for a sign, even as he offers up what appears to him to be a problem (we are old). We can appreciate that. But, he should have believed. So, Gabriel gives him a sign. Actually he gives him a couple of signs. First of all, he points out the obvious. An angel is standing in front of you and you are having a conversation with him. That is a pretty big sign!! In this response (v.19), Gabriel reveals his own name, his position and his mission. I stand in the presence of God (what an awesome thought) and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. This really is good news for an old man. God remembered, God heard and God has responded. But, then Gabriel announces that since Zechariah in essence asked for a sign, that God is going to give him one. You can't speak.

Now, think of that on a personal level for a second. Zechariah just found out that after all these years, he is not only going to be a father, but God has announced that the next major event in the fulfillment of his plan for this world is now underway. God has heard, God has come, look out! But, Zechariah (God remembers) can't say that, because he can't speak. He, like so many of the children of Israel heard, but did not fully believe. Lack of belief muddies the truth.

Think of this response on a national level. John did come and true to his mission, he prepared the way for Christ. The nation of Israel had an opportunity to believe and be a voice to the world. While some did, most rejected John's message and of course Christ. The result was Israel was silenced. For 1900 years she was silenced.

The section concludes with Elizabeth, believing, pregnant and speaking. God really has come through. The fulfillment of His promises is taking place right now. All of this is just setting the table for another visit from Gabriel who gives further evidence that God is stepping in.

Concl.

1. God always remembers His promises.

And all of His promises are ultimately fulfilled in or by Christ.

2. You have a 2nd chair part in God's plan.

John is not the Savior, nor the hero – Christ is. In every way Jesus is superior to John. It is an incredible joy to be able to participate

3. How can you be a reflection of Christ this week? Listen, then speak!

