



**WESTLAKE HILLS**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**"Zechariah's Song of Praise"**  
**Sermon Series: "The Canticles of Christmas"**

**Luke 1:5-25, 67-80**

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**November 28, 2010**

**Luke 1:5-25      *The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold***

(NIV 1984)

<sup>5</sup> In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. <sup>7</sup> But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

<sup>8</sup> Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

<sup>11</sup> Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. <sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. <sup>16</sup> Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

<sup>18</sup> Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

<sup>19</sup> The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. <sup>20</sup> And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. <sup>22</sup> When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

<sup>23</sup> When his time of service was completed, he returned home. <sup>24</sup> After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. <sup>25</sup> "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

**Footnotes:**

- a. [Luke 1:15](#) Or from his mother's womb

**Luke 1:67-80      Zechariah's Song**

<sup>67</sup> His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

<sup>68</sup> "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has come and has redeemed his people.

<sup>69</sup> He has raised up a horn<sup>[a]</sup> of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David

<sup>70</sup> (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

<sup>71</sup> salvation from our enemies  
and from the hand of all who hate us—

<sup>72</sup> to show mercy to our fathers  
and to remember his holy covenant,

<sup>73</sup> the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

<sup>74</sup> to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,

and to enable us to serve him without fear

<sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

<sup>76</sup> And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;



for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,  
77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins,  
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,  
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven  
79 to shine on those living in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

80 And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.

**Footnotes:**

- a. [Luke 1:69](#) Horn here symbolizes strength.
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## **Introduction.**

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, and over the course of the next four weeks we'll be considering the Canticles of Christmas. "Canticle" is a fancy word for a non-metrical song, poem, or hymn of praise. There are several canticles in the birth narratives of the Gospels, and we'll spend the next few weeks studying them.

This also ties in well with big music Sunday in Advent on December 12<sup>th</sup>, which some of us refer to as the Big Sing! All our choirs and an orchestra will be leading us in worship as they present John Rutter's *The Magnificat*, which is one of the canticles of Christmas. This morning we study Zechariah's Song of Praise in Luke 1.

I want you to do a learning exercise with me this morning as we begin. Close your eyes and go back in your memory to a favorite Christmas. Picture a scene from your past which brought you great joy. Who are the people involved? Where are you? What are the colors, the smells, the sounds?

Now open your eyes and turn to your neighbor. Pair off together. Find out who's birthday is closest to today. When you've determined that, then the person who's birthday is closest to today, I want them to try and explain that favorite Christmas memory to their partner. But there's a catch; you can't use any words, you can't say anything. Try and explain this favorite Christmas memory in another way – using your hands, drawing a picture, any way other than by speaking.

What was your experience like? How effective were you in explaining your favorite Christmas memory? Pretty tough, isn't it? Now you know what Zechariah must have felt like when he tried to explain what had happened in the temple when the angel of the Lord appeared to him.

## **I. The Story Retold.**

Zechariah was a Jewish priest. Every direct descendant of Aaron was automatically a priest in Israel, and that meant that for all intents and purposes there were far too many priests. At the time of David the priests were divided into 24 divisions who served in Jerusalem on a rotating basis, and Zechariah belonged to the division of Abijah. Only during Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles did all the priests serve together. For the rest of the year, each division served two periods of one week each. Priests who loved their work looked forward to that week of service more than anything else; it was the highlight of their year.

There were as many as 20,000 priests altogether in Israel at this time, so around 400 served each week at the temple. All the duties were allocated by the casting of lots, or random choice, and to be chosen by lot to burn incense in the daily offering was considered a unique privilege. Only once in a lifetime was a priest allowed to receive this high honor.

The priest would be accompanied by two assistants and proceed to the altar in the Court of the Priests next to the veil of the temple which led to the Holy of Holies. One of the assistants carried a golden bowl containing the burning coals from the altar of the burnt offering, and he would spread them on the altar of incense. Then he would withdraw. The other assistant carried the golden censer



filled with incense, and he would arrange the aromatic substance upon the altar. He, too, would withdraw after completing his task.

Next came a moment of silence. Then a signal was given, and the priest would place the incense upon the coals, causing a cloud to rise. As the fragrant aroma rose, the priest said a prayer that consisted of thanksgiving for blessings received and a supplication for the peace of Israel. The people gathered outside the sanctuary and also prayed in a prostrate position and with outstretched hands. They would wait for the priest to return from the altar of incense and walk to the steps in front of the sanctuary. On these steps the priest, accompanied by other priests, would pronounce the Aaronic blessing, and this benediction was then followed by songs of praise and public offerings by the people.

But on this day, the people waited, and they waited, and they waited. For a long time Zechariah stayed at the altar of incense, and they all began to wonder what had happened to him. Little did they know of the amazing encounter he had with an angel of the Lord, an encounter that would change his life forever.

When he did reappear, he could not speak, and there must have been a look of amazement in his eyes. It wasn't until nine months later when his son John the Baptist was born did he regain his ability to speak, and then they couldn't shut him up. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he praised God and prophesied regarding the goodness of the Lord and the promise this son held as a prophet of God in the future. He sang a canticle of Christmas.

## **II. The Song of Zechariah.**

Zechariah's song of praise has two main parts: 1) praise to God for His deliverance through the coming Messiah; and 2) celebration for the role his son John the Baptist would play in this work of grace. In both sections of the song there is a strong emphasis on salvation, both national and personal. There is also a striking use of a literary device called a *chiasmus* which uses an inversion of parallel literary structures to build the sentences. God's faithfulness to His covenant is central to the poem, and the song makes a connection between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and its Old Testament roots.

God keeps His promises, and what He says He will do. At just the right time in history, God put into motion the fulfillment of His promise to send a Redeemer who would save the world. In the Old Testament God said a forerunner would come to prepare the way for the Messiah. He would be one who was like Elijah, the prophet of the Old Testament who was a mighty servant of God. And God did what He said He would do.

A father's pride must have filled Zechariah's heart as he thought about the unique role his son would play in the drama of history. When John grew up, he would be a prophet of God who would prepare the way of the Lord. "That's *my* boy!" Zechariah would say. "God brought him into the world by a miracle, and he's gonna do great things. Yes, that's *my* boy! Thank you, Lord"

## **III. Lessons We Can Learn.**

This amazing story offers us insights into the grace of God and His purposes in the world. I want you to notice several truths this passage tells us. **First, notice the sovereignty of God in the events of the story.** Zechariah was chosen by lot to burn the incense. Out of all the priests that week, he was the one selected at random for the job. And yet it was no accident. God was behind it all, and in the providence of God He used the opportunity to take the first step in preparing to send His Son Jesus Christ to the world to be the Messiah.

God arranges divine appointments all the time – chance meetings, unexpected letters, coincidences that defy reason. God has a plan for this world, and He has a plan for each of us in this sanctuary. Don't be surprised when God shows up from out of nowhere in your life.

Notice also **God's sovereignty in opening the womb of Elizabeth so that she conceived a child**, even in her older age. When hope was gone, when they had given up on their dream, God provided a



wonderful blessing that was beyond Zechariah's capacity to believe. Our God is all-powerful, and He can do even the impossible. Are you facing an impossible situation? Have you given up on your dream? Are you in unbelief that God will do what He said He would do? Then Zechariah's story is for you, and it's for me.

The **next** thing I want you to notice from this story is how **God shows up when people are just doing their jobs**. The angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah while he was performing the task of a priest burning the incense during the daily sacrifice. There was nothing special about this particular sacrifice; it was one of the normal sacrifices that were made twice on a daily basis at the temple. Sometimes God likes to show up in a mighty way when we are simply doing our jobs. We should not be surprised that God wants to be a part of our work-a-day worlds, and it may just be His desire to use you in a special way in the coming week at your place of work, school, or in your neighborhood. Look for ways that God will manifest Himself where you live, work and play.

**Finally**, when you're tempted to doubt God, **be careful not to respond with unbelief**. Zechariah had a hard time accepting the message Gabriel gave him that day, and he suffered the consequences of his lack of faith. God can open wombs, but He can also shut mouths, and we should be careful that when God tells us something - by an angel or simply in our reading of the Bible - that we take God at His word and respond with faith and action. It was not until Zechariah, in obedience to the angel's words, confirmed on a writing tablet that the boy's name indeed was to be John that his tongue was loosened. And then he made up for lost time and the 9+ months he had been silenced. They couldn't shut him up! Let's be people of faith who trust in God and obey His Word.

### **Conclusion.**

As we close this morning, let me ask - are you only looking for God in the spectacular this Christmas, or are you open to see Him work in the ordinary things of your life? Have you developed an eye of faith to see the fingerprints of God on your daily world?

Let me also ask, do you look to God and His sovereignty to provide for your needs, even in those times of significant disappointment and loss? Perhaps you yourself struggle with infertility, or you've lost a job, or a child has left home, or a loved one has died, or you are facing significant financial stress with the coming holidays. Is God big enough to deal with your problems, and are you trusting in Him to see you through? Have faith, my friend. He is the sovereign God of the universe, and you are His beloved child.

One of the best ways to begin Advent is by coming to the Lord's Table and remembering the reason for Christ's first appearing - that He might die for our sins and redeem our broken lives. As we come to the celebration of Communion, let us think on these things and prepare our hearts for this Advent when we celebrate the canticles of Christmas. Amen.

