

**READ:** Luke 1:5-25 (ESV)

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. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 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. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 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. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 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."

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." 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. 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." And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. 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. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

ENTER THE STORY:

We are twenty days into this advent, and we finally made it to the New Testament and to the first event that signals the start of something new and exciting, but before we talk about Zechariah, we have to back up a few hundred years.

We first need to understand what preceded the events that led to Christ's birth before we can grasp how the people felt in real time as these events happened. You see, between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament there are approximately 400 years where nothing is recorded in scripture. God sent one final message through the prophet Malachi, and then he went silent...no more visions, no more dreams, no more visits from angels, and no more prophets or messages. There were many interesting and noteworthy things that happened during this period of silence, including the miracle of Hanukkah, so it is reasonable to assume that God was still involved and overseeing the circumstances, he just wasn't vocal about it.

This would have been devastating for the people of Israel!

God had been communicating with them in one way or another for over a thousand years. His silence probably caused many of them to wonder if he still loved them and planned to rescue them from their enemies, which, during Zechariah's time, were the Romans.

After 400 years of silence, an angel shows up in the temple with a message from God.

Can you imagine how the people felt when they realized what had happened to Zechariah? God had RETURNED! This was a pivotal moment for them, but it also explains why Zechariah's initial response was to be afraid. Remember, he had only read about angels. He had never been in the presence of one before.

Have you ever been so shocked or confused by something you saw that you tried blinking and rubbing your eyes to make sure what you saw was REAL? That's what I imagine happened with Zechariah, but he soon found out that he had nothing to fear.

Gabriel's first words were the traditional greeting of an angel with good news, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard..." What prayer had been heard? Was it the same prayer Abraham and Sarah had prayed many years earlier – that God would give them a child? Well, YES, but in that exact moment, Zechariah was performing one of the most solemn, once-in-a-lifetime tasks for a priest: burning incense in front of the veil in the Holy Place. This means he would also have been offering up the traditional prayers for the salvation of Israel and the world, and those prayers were also going to be answered!

Gabriel's announcement looks forward, but it also looks backward because, just like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth were unable to have children and were past the age of childbearing. This is an intentional parallel by the author to connect these two stories!

What is the link? Zechariah's offspring would pave the way for God's fulfillment of his promise to Abraham...that one of his descendants would bless the whole world.

Moreover, when Gabriel prophesied to Zechariah that his son would walk in the power and spirit of Elijah, he was drawing another parallel to the final verses in the Old Testament: Malachi 4:5-6, "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."

It was all starting to come together! The prophecies from the Old Testament were beginning to unfold right before Zechariah's eyes, and even though he had every reason to believe, his concern for the details caused him to question. In fact, the question he asked was the EXACT same question Abraham asked God when he was told he would inherit the promised land... "How will I know?" In other words, "How can I be sure this will happen?"

This reaction resulted in Zechariah's own period of silence that would last until the day his "just-like-Elijah" baby was born. The baby whose voice would not be silent but would cry out from the wilderness and make ready a people for the Lord. And when this baby arrived, Zechariah would do just as Gabriel told him and give his baby the name John, which means "Yahweh is gracious."

Isn't this exactly what we celebrate at Christmas? The gracious nature of God - who loves so deeply that he is willing to go to ANY LENGTH to rescue his people, even if it means sending his Son into our story to meet us where we are. That Son will come in the most humble of ways but rather than offer up incense before the veil in the holy of holies, he will offer himself up on our behalf.

PRAY: God, you are the master storyteller, and you have created a beautiful tapestry of stories, weaving your glory and your grace throughout every page. Open our eyes this season to all the ways your grace is evident in our lives every single day! Amen.