



It's that time of the year: the time when families all over the world head to their basement for the cherished yuletide tradition of grunting and sweating as they yank all the dusty, cobweb-covered boxes full of Christmas ornaments out from underneath all the other dusty, cobweb-covered boxes. Then they take them upstairs and begin the other cherished tradition of figuring out what happened to the missing Christmas ornaments from last year, before finally

giving up and going out to buy some new ones. [with thanks to Joseph Riggs]



Christmas is in twenty-three days. Twenty-three. The people of Israel did not have a countdown to a day of celebration. They only had a promise – the promise that one day the Messiah would come and rescue them. They held on to the words of the prophet Isaiah: *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.*

Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this. [Isaiah 9:6-7]



They were waiting for the kingdom to be established. They were waiting for their King to rescue them and bring judgment and justice – especially judgment! We know the King has come. We know what they didn't: that as commentator Norval Geldenhuys said, they stood *on the threshold of the supremely important period in the history of mankind . . . The appearance and activity of Jesus on earth [that] is the central and most important event of all time. Everything*

that had gone before led up to it. And everything that has followed upon it is connected therewith.

It had been four hundred years since the people of Israel had heard the voice of a prophet. God had been silent. They were waiting . . . waiting for something, though they didn't know what it was that they were waiting for. Just . . . something, They were barely holding on, but they knew – *they knew!* – that God hadn't abandoned them. He wouldn't! *Would He?*

Four . . . hundred . . . years. When would the Messiah come? When would they be rescued?



There was in the days of Herod [turn to Luke 1 with me as we read the story of the one who would point to Jesus as Messiah], There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

Perhaps some explanation would be good here. Priesthood was a hereditary position. Every direct descendant of Aaron was automatically a priest. And to marry a woman who was also a descendant of Aaron meant that you were especially blessed. So here was a good and godly couple with a rich and godly heritage. Which makes next verse all the sadder: *But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.*

This was a near tragedy. Children were a sign of God's blessing. Psalm 127 says *Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them* [Psalm 127:3-5] A lack of children could be seen as a curse. In fact, being childless was a valid grounds for divorce!

Our message isn't about Elizabeth, but I can't imagine how she would have felt as she went about her daily tasks. Would it have been embarrassment? Shame as time went on? Would she have held her head high and ignored the comments of others? Would she have had the support of or believed the words of support from Zacharias over the years? Knowing the history of the Jewish nation, would she have considered finding a surrogate, as Sarah had done all those years earlier?

We don't know. But we do know that they would have prayed for a child and then asked God why He hadn't answered their deepest prayer. Much like we pray and then wonder why God might not answer our requests. Hearing that God has a different plan doesn't make our lack any better. Nor does hearing that we don't have enough faith! But that takes us back to the purpose of prayer: it isn't to get God to do things for us, it's getting us to discover God's will for us . . . and once we know His will then we can ask boldly.

Prayer isn't *God, give me, God, do this: it's here I am, what do You want, what do You have for me?* The *as you wish* comes from our lips, not from His!

So there they are. Elizabeth and Zacharias. *So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.*

Every morning and every evening sacrifices had to be made on behalf of the people. There may have been 20,000 priests in Israel at this time, so the priests were divided into sections, and a schedule was developed; each section was given the responsibility to perform the necessary rituals twice a year. One of the privileges was to burn incense on the altar, and lots were drawn to choose who would have the honour. There were so many priests that many would die without having had the honour – and it was an honour that could be given only once in a lifetime [if he were chosen, the priest would considered it the greatest day of the priests life]. And that day Zacharias was chosen.

And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.

Prayer was an important part of the life of a Jew – and still is. The people would have gathered outside the temple three times a day to pray, and the first and the last of these prayer gatherings would have been at the same time as the morning and afternoon incense offerings.

So picture it. The people were outside the temple, praying. The priests were inside the temple, praying, and at the appropriate time Zacharias went into the holy place to offer the incense offering.

They prayed for God's touch. They prayed for God's presence. They prayed for God to come in power. And He did!

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to [Zacharias], standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

This would be a natural reaction. It happened to the shepherds, some months later: *Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.* [Luke 2:8-9] Of course they were! We get comfortable with who we are and with what we do, and when God actually enters our lives we aren't sure what to do or what to think!

If you honestly pray for God to direct your life, and if you honestly allow Him to direct your life, He will direct your life! If you ask God to show you what to do and you listen for His answer, you will hear it. The problem is that too often we just do the first thing I mentioned and we forget about the second thing. We pray, asking God to help us, but we don't wait for Him to help us. We don't know when God will meet with us. We don't know where God will meet with us. We don't know how God will meet us. But He will and we'd better pay attention!

an angel of the Lord appeared to [Zacharias], standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias,

Right. If that's me, I'm running from the room, screaming. I'm passed out on the floor. I'm shaking and quaking where I stand. *Don't be afraid?* An angel - if that's what it is - shows up and I'm supposed to go on like it's all nice and normal? Like that's going to happen.

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is 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 in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also 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. He will also 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 a people prepared for the Lord."

Put yourself in Zacharias' place. He's over being troubled. He's over being afraid. Somehow he has accepted the visit of the angel [at least it isn't the ghost of Christmas past, present, or future]. He listens to what the angel has to say. *What? What?* he says. *Hold on. Back up. What did you just say?*

He will also 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 a people prepared for the Lord" says the angel. No, before that, says Zacharias.

And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God says the angel. No, before that, says Zacharias.

He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb says the angel. No, before that, says Zacharias.

For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink says the angel. No, before that, says Zacharias.

And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth says the angel.

To that Zacharias says *If you said what I think you said you'd better believe there will be joy and gladness. But go back further.*

Your prayer is heard says the angel.

That's nice to hear, Zacharias replies. Sometimes you pray and you pray and you pray and you wonder if God is hearing you. You wonder if your words hit some sort of barrier or protective force field. You wonder if you are getting through to God. And then He answers.

If He answers with a *no* you can be quite disappointed. Even if it's the best thing for you. You may not realize it at the time. You see a path. You want to go down that path. You ask God to lead you down that path. And He says *no*. And you wonder *why*? And later you discover *why*! *Then*, you are happy. *Now . . .* not so much.

your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.

And Zacharias said *Yeeha! . . .* I mean *praise the Lord!* They didn't think it would ever happen. They didn't think it *could* ever happen. *A son! A son! We're going to have a son!*

and you shall call his name John.

Hmm. *Actually, Liz and I have talked about that. We had always thought that if we ever did have a child . . . and we'd given up on it . . . we'd name him after . . .*

We don't know what God will call us to do or to be but He will call, and when He does call we need to say yes to Him. Not try to find excuses, like Moses did. *I stutter. I'm not brave. Other people could do a better job.* All those things were true. But God called Moses because Moses was the right person for the job.

God calls us all to do something special for Him. Paul wrote that *There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.* [1 Corinthians 12:4-6] He wrote [this is from THE MESSAGE] *The variety is wonderful: wise counsel, clear understanding, simple trust, healing the sick, miraculous acts, proclamation, distinguishing between spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues. All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what, and when.* [1 Corinthians 12:7-11] God has called you to do something special for Him. Will you do it? Will you listen to what He says?

So Zacharias is in temple praying and an angel shows up and gives him some great news. Amazing news. Fantastic news!

Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

He's had a minute to think about it. If it were today he'd probably say something like *C'mon that can't happen!* He'd look around. *Am I on Candid Camera? Am I being punk'd?*

Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

I think that there's a big problem in the church today. Outside of the church, definitely. But inside the church too. We no longer believe in the miraculous. Here's how one singer put it a few years back:

*I don't believe in miracles
I know what's real I don't pretend
I don't believe in miracles
Or stories with a happy end - Life is no one's friend*

*I don't believe in miracles
I've been around I've seen enough
The only way to get along you must be strong
You must be tough - life is one big bluff*

We don't believe in the miraculous any more. Maybe we want to. But the rational part of our brain takes over – or is it that the rational takes over our brain. We know so much . . . we know about how the world operates, we know about sub-atomic particles, we know about the nervous system . . . and that's become so commonplace that it is no longer miraculous. And then we can do things ourselves so we forget about God. Or we don't need God. Or we ignore God.

Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is [I'm not going to say she's old . . . she's] well advanced in years."

And I think – I have absolutely no proof and no reason to suggest this – but I think that the angel sighed.

Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

Was that a *prove it* challenge? If so, Gabriel took up the challenge.

And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings."

Do angels get exasperated? If so, Gabriel was. *I'm Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. He sent me. And You doubt me? You think that I'm only an hallucination? You want proof, Gabriel asks. I'll give you proof!*

Jesus . . . Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and said *a wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign* [Matthew 16:4] but Gabriel was willing to give one to Zacharias.

But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time."

It is a good thing that God doesn't deal with *us* as we deserve to be dealt with. Our prayer should ever be [as that father prayed] *help my unbelief*. Or better, *forgive my unbelief*. Our prayer should ever be *help me, lead me, guide me, and keep me*. Meanwhile . . .

the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple.

They marvelled. They were astonished. They wondered what was happening. Really, they were getting restless. They were worried. He was taking so long. Normally a priest would offer the incense and get out of the sanctuary as quickly as possible so the people wouldn't worry that he'd been struck

dead by God. So they waited . . . and waited . . . and waited still more . . . but no Zacharias. Until finally . . . craned necks . . . *there he is!*

But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless.

Speechless. Not a good thing for a priest. Not a good thing for a minister. Especially when he has work to do. Zacharias was *supposed* to come out and pronounce the benediction over them:

*"The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make His face shine upon you,
And be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up His countenance upon you,
And give you peace."* [Numbers 6:24-26]

He couldn't do it. Couldn't do anything but shake his head. Maybe point to his throat. Mouth a few words, but no sound came out. They knew . . . something had happened in there. They knew . . . he had been in the presence of God.

Maybe that's something that we should take into consideration a bit more than we do. We come to a service to meet with God and to meet with each other, to be challenged and encouraged by God and to be encouraged [and challenged] by each other. Maybe at the end of our services we should take a couple of minutes and before we get up and start visiting with one another just listen to God . . . just enjoy the presence of God.

Soon . . . probably much too soon for him . . . his week of service was over. His time in the temple was done.

So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying, "Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

So there it is. Really, the beginning of the Christmas story. The Christmas story, beginning with the forerunner, the one who would one day announce the One.

It is a story of doubt: when he heard the promise of a son Zacharias said *Not likely – I'm too old . . . my wife is too old*. He wasn't the only doubter. When Mary was visited and heard these words: *you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end*" she replied *"How can this be, since I do not know a man?"* [Luke 1:31-34]

I don't think so. I doubt it. One said we're too old. The other said I'm too young. And God said I have a plan. And you are part of it.

You are part of God's plan as well. You just have to be open and find your part.