

The Angelic Announcement of the Birth and Mission of John (Lk. 1.5-25)

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Pastor Ostella

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⁵ 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. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. ⁸ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ 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." ²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² 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. ²³ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. ²⁴ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ²⁵ "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

Introduction

When you read a large section of Scripture (such as Lk. 1.5-25) it is good to look for the core of the apple around which everything else finds its place. What is the main thrust of the text that brings the following characters together in the story line: Herod, Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Gabriel? Actually, Herod is on the margins, so things center on a priest, his wife, and an angel. The priest and his wife have no children, as we read in 1.7: **Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.** In this context, the appearance of the angel Gabriel brings us to the heart of the story, which has to do with a remedy of the problem of childlessness. Simply put: this old couple will have a child. However, it is much more detailed than that because for one thing the angel names the child: **you shall call his name John** (1.13). Thus, our title is "The angelic announcement of the birth and mission of John." We have three ways of considering this announcement: its background (5-12), core (13-17), and aftermath (18-25).

1A. Background to the announcement (5-12)

In a word, the background to this spectacular announcement, by an angel no less, is piety in tension. Or, for short, it is about "being righteous...but." The tension in the story line is about being righteous, but experiencing reproach. We get a glimpse into the life of faithful, faith-full, old covenant saints at the dawning of the new day. They walk with God and they do not sleep on a bed of roses. That said; let us consider some background points.

1) First, the time in history

Luke marks the time by reference to a king by the name of Herod: **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** (1.5). There are a number of "Herods" in the writings of Luke (in both the Gospel and the Acts). In 1.5, this king is Herod the Great who was a Roman king over Palestine at the time of the birth of our Lord. He ruled from 37 BC to 4 BC by the commission of Mark Antony and the Roman senate. In Luke 3.1, mention is made of his son, Herod Antipas who ruled Galilee (the territory east of the Sea of Galilee) and Perea (which is north-west of the Dead Sea). He ruled 4 BC to AD 39. Here in 1.5, Luke locks us into time of Herod the "great." We put the word great in quotes because he is responsible for the killing of numerous young children less than two years of age because he feared the coming of a Jewish king. Notably, Luke does not cover the slaying of the young children as Matthew does (Mat. 2.16). Luke not only roots us

historically relative to the Roman rulers, but here he also introduces a specific priest by name and ancestry and he cites his wife by name along with her ancestry: toward the end of the days of Herod the Great, **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.** It is very down to earth reporting. His attention is on happenings in time and space on this earth regarding specific people.

2) The condition of a righteous couple (continuing the matter of background in 5-12)

The language is quite powerful regarding their walk with God: **they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord** (1.6).

The fact that both have such a high quality of life is astounding when you compare it with human fallenness in general and with the constant and pervasive disobedience of Israel in particular. These two people are Israelites. They are children of Adam and Eve and yet they are pious Jews of a most remarkable and, shall we say, surprising kind. They are righteous **before God**, they live **blamelessly** in all that they do wherever their feet take them in life, and this righteousness and blamelessness in all of their living pertains to **all the commandments and statutes of the Lord**.

Luke could spend time explaining the astounding nature of this *piety within sinful Israel*, but that is not his concern. What he does with regard to this high caliber godliness is put it immediately in tension. That is, he cites the fact that they were childless: **But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years** (1.7). We have a strong contrast (but) and we have another “both.” Surely, we have a reminder in this text of OT saints to whom God promised offspring and who walked with God into their old age *without* having children, such as Abraham/Sarah and Jacob/Rachel. So, the childless condition of this *righteous* couple, Zechariah a priest and his wife Elizabeth is important background; it is important for us to know.

3) Appearance of an angel

We should note Luke’s penchant for detail as we follow the narrative regarding the appearance of an angel in relation to happenings in the temple area and outside of it. Four words capture the event: serving, praying, standing, and fearing.

a) Serving

The angel appeared while Zechariah was serving in the temple: **Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty,⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense** (1.8-9). There were many priests waiting to serve, more were present than could serve. They were there “on call.” So, they decided who would serve by lot. Many priests might never have the privilege of actually entering the temple to burn incense. It is comparable to going for jury duty; you get downtown and find that you are one of many, and only some are chosen; you might be summoned to serve many times and never actually serve on a jury. That could have happened to Zechariah, but, in the providence of God, he was chosen by the casting of lots. While he was doing his job in the temple, the remarkable event occurred: while serving at the altar of incense an angel appeared.

b) Praying

Many people were outside the temple area praying when the angel appeared. In the story line, this fact contributes to the tension of the pious in Israel who were in prayer at the very time when the incense was being burned. In reality, the incense represented their longings, hopes, and prayers that God would be pleased to grant their desires for the blessing of Israel: **And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense** (1.10).

c) Standing

Interestingly, Luke locates the angel who appeared to Zechariah: **there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense** (1.11).

d) Fearing

With the mention of Zechariah’s fear in verse 12, the tension mounts: **And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.**

2A. The core of the announcement (13-17)

The core of the announcement is a message of good tidings. The announcement is full of promises. First, there is the specific promise of a son. Elizabeth will have a son: his name will be John; that is what you will call him (1.13). Second, there is a promise of joy to the parents and others, **And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth** (1.14). Finally, the heart of the heart of things turns out to be the promise of the ministry or mission of John. That is the real reason for the glad tidings. The reason for the joy is the promise of this son's greatness. He will be a holy man, set apart by God and filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb: **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** (1.15). Consequently, his mission will be marvelously effective: ¹⁶ **And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,** ¹⁷ **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** (1.16-17). The mission of John is to prepare a people for the coming of the Lord.

This is why John is called the forerunner or way preparer. His effectiveness is by the work of the Spirit and in the spirit and power of Elijah. Therefore, two things follow. 1) On one hand, John will in fact turn many to the Lord their God (He is their God even in their disobedience). The phrase "fathers to the children" is parallel with "the disobedient to the wisdom of the just." This speaks of true and genuine conversion on the order of the teaching of Jesus that one must become like a child to enter the kingdom of God. 2) On the other hand, John will make ready a people prepared for the Lord. He opens the door to the new Israel. His baptism is entry-way of incorporation into the new covenant family of God. Preparing the way of the Lord, John will form a new covenant people in a remnant from God's covenant people under judgment (and still His covenant people to whom He will fulfill His promises). God will keep His word faithfully to the unfaithful nation; He is bringing fulfillment to realization through John. This is the beginning of good news, of gospel good news.

3A. Aftermath of the announcement

In 1.18-25, we have the aftermath of this angelic announcement. We can summarize it like this: Zechariah's muteness because of doubt becomes Elizabeth's hiddenness with hope.

1) Zechariah's unbelief posed in a question: **And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years"** (1.18).

Granted, angels do not appear to us at our work stations everyday. But Zechariah is a man of faith and piety; he knows the promise of the OT; he lives by the word of hope of the coming one; his wife's sense of reproach as a righteous woman has its roots in the promise of a special descendent within the family of Abraham. Zechariah knows the experience of Abraham and Sarah regarding the promised offspring that was given to them in their old age! He knows that Abraham and Sarah entertained angels when they received confirmation of the coming birth of their son Isaac and he knows that Isaac is the coming one in anticipation, ahead of time, in promise and type. At the least, we can say that Zechariah is a man of faith who embraced the promises of God's OT word and lived by those promises.

So, here is a pious man who knows and lives the promises of God, but who is in tension in more ways than one: he longs for the hope of Israel in the coming of the Lord. When an angel appears to him as he serves in temple (location?) he falters: ¹⁸ **And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years"**. This leads to a judgment on Zechariah that comes because of his unbelief: as the angel tells him in verse 20: **because you did not believe my words**. Let's turn to the consequence of his unbelief

2) The angel's answer with a word of judgment *and* good news (19-20)

¹⁹ **And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.** ²⁰ **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."**

With the good news ringing in his ears, Zechariah faces the consequence of being mute until the birth of his son (20a). The angel identifies himself as Gabriel who was sent from the presence of God to bring this good news to Zechariah. Announcing this judgment, the angel affirms that his words will be fulfilled in their time. That is, they will find fulfillment in the appointed time. God has a plan and each stage of history is appointed. In that plan are the coming of the Lord and the coming of His forerunner. That appointed time is near, it will happen through you and your wife in the unfolding of the promise to Abraham and his wife. This is covenant fulfillment. The new day is beginning; this is the crack of dawn.

3) Response of the people to Zechariah's muteness (21-22)

²¹ **And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple.** ²² **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.**

His muteness indicates his unbelief in the good news and thus draws attention to that good news as a sign of it. The silence speaks loudly of what is about to happen. When it occurs the mute will speak the tidings of great joy.

4) The blessing of Elizabeth and her hiddenness and non-muteness

In 1.23-25, Luke says: ²³ **And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.** ²⁴ **After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying,** ²⁵ **"Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."** Zechariah returns home and Elizabeth conceives, and she keeps herself hidden for five months.

Her words regarding being a reproach (1.25) echo of the words of Rachel (Gen. 30.23; 21.6; Isa. 4.1). Why does she maintain this hiddenness? Many commentators think that the rationale is to avoid the continuance of public disgrace as a barren woman until God's favor to her is apparent to all (Green, 81). Better: the hiddenness does relate to the reproach, but surely being up in years at this juncture, that is not so biting either from the outside or the inside. It is more that she savors her joy. The pregnancy is her answer; withdrawing draws attention to her life by her relative absence in public until the facts, not her voice, become her *raison detre*: her justification in answer to the reproaches. The answer is in the happening; the divine blessing on an older woman in analogy with Abraham and Sarah (and Jacob and Rachel): the answer in the act speaks loudly, removes the muteness, and declares the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that is about to find realization because her son John will be the forerunner of the Lord!

Conclusion (on gospel-glad tidings)

1) On the giving of gospel-glad tidings

Present divine action is accompanied by inspired utterances. Luke directs our thoughts to what God is revealing in these extraordinary events. The angel comes from the presence of God to announce glad tidings: **And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news"** (1.19). Furthermore, the sudden affliction of muteness *shouts* the gospel message in the promise of John the Baptist and what his life and work is all about and to which it points: the coming of the Lord for whom he prepares the way. None of this is due to the biographical interest of the author regarding the psychological states of the characters in the story (to satisfy the reader's curiosity). Instead, the emphasis falls on inspired disclosures to cast a brilliant light upon the good news of the coming of Christ that the coming of the forerunner anticipates (Stonehouse, *Witness of Luke*, 46-49). It is God's good news in which He interprets the extraordinary events. The birth of a son to an elderly couple is not the extraordinary event of ultimate importance here. Supreme importance pertains to what the birth of John means for the history of God's redeeming grace. The coming of John paves the way for the coming of Jesus in fulfillment of the eternal plan of redemption.

2) On responding to gospel-glad tidings

What is the right response to God's good news? Simply, it is not unbelief and muteness. What is it then? By contrast, the right response to God's good news in the coming of John and Jesus is "believing with the mouth." There are various forms of muteness. Physical muteness occurs when someone does not have the ability to speak or express words with the vocal cords, mouth, tongue, and lips. Physical muteness illustrates spiritual muteness, the inability to open the mouth and use your vocal cords, tongue, and lips to speak the things of God. The speaking is not to justify yourself or to proclaim your own glory. It is to announce the good news of a new covenant family, a prepared people that began in the days of John when he paved the road ahead of Jesus.

3) On waiting for the gospel-glad tidings

Hiddenness covers our righteousness now on the way where we are righteous in tension and do "desert works" on this side of Canaan. Thus, even when we face consequences for our sins and failures, in the consequences are promises of good tidings. Behind a frowning providence our Father hides a smiling face. Marvelously, He smiles on the nations with the good tidings of the gospel of John the way preparer of the Lord Jesus. Finally, and wondrously, the fact that the justification of this couple, especially Elizabeth, remains hidden and muted until God acts, and His acts become evident for all to see, tokens the future justification of believers when what is now hidden becomes open. We are immersed by this text in gospel-glad tidings.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God who ordered the steps of John the Baptist from his conception in his mother's womb to his death at the hands of Herod Antipas; may the Holy Spirit teach us the gospel-glad tidings of the coming of John as the forerunner of the coming of the Lord Jesus; may He teach us how not to be mute but to glorify the triune God both now and forevermore, amen.