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# Zechariah:

## A Great Faith

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Message by Steve McElroy, Guest Speaker

Sunday Sermon Dec 15, 2013

Scripture Passage Luke 1:5-25

Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church Vancouver, Canada

## Luke 1:5-25

<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 righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. <sup>7</sup> But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

<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 worshippers 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 call him 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 before he is born. <sup>16</sup> He will bring back many of the people of Israel 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 parents 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 said to him, "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 appointed 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."

## Part 2 of the 'Approaching Christmas' series

- ❖ Two weeks ago we looked at a text from Isaiah. In that text the prophet says, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light."
- ❖ We saw that Jesus fulfilled this prophecy through his life, bringing us knowledge of who God is, and what he is like;
- ❖ Jesus fulfilled the prophecy through his death, redeeming us and exchanging our sin for the goodness of God;
- ❖ and he fulfilled it through his resurrection, which allows us to enter into the life and presence of God.
- ❖ Today we fast forward more 700 years, from the Assyrian empire to the

Roman, and from the Old Testament to the New.

- ❖ We're not yet at the Christmas event, but after a long silence in which no prophet spoke, the pace is accelerating.
- ❖ Things begin to happen when the Lord sends an angel to a man named Zechariah.

## The big story

- ❖ Before we get into Zechariah's story, I want to pause and invite you to take a look at the full sweep of the Christmas story.
- ❖ We picked it up from Isaiah two weeks ago, but really it goes all the way back to the time of Adam and Eve.
  - ❖ Despite their disobedience and fall, God told the serpent that deceived them that he would be crushed by Eve's offspring.<sup>1</sup> We can see that this was looking forward to Jesus.
  - ❖ God made a covenant with Abraham and said that he would become a great nation, and that all nations on earth would be blessed through him.
  - ❖ He called Moses to deliver Israel out of slavery and give them the law. Moses then told the people that God would raise up another prophet like him – again anticipating Jesus.
  - ❖ He chose David as Israel's king and promised that the Messiah would come through David's line and that his kingdom would have no end.
  - ❖ He spoke through Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and the other prophets.
- ❖ They were all looking ahead to the birth of Christ, and in the view of Scripture Jesus' birth would be the defining event in the history that was yet to come.

- ❖ Many of us will have heard these things since we were in Sunday school. But let's not let our familiarity with the story cause us to lose our wonder at it.
- ❖ The Christmas story is the story of God's purposes for the world. And there's no story anything like it:
- ❖ Lesslie Newbiggin was a missionary to India and a writer. He tells us what a Hindu scholar<sup>2</sup> once said to him about the Bible:

I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don't need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. ... There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.<sup>3</sup>

- ❖ The Hindu religious scholar is right in seeing the Bible as a great narrative with a purpose.
- ❖ In both the Old and New Testaments, Jesus is at the centre of that narrative.
- ❖ Now what has this got to do with Zechariah? If you notice the sermon title in your bulletin you'll see that we will be looking at Zechariah as a person of faith.
- ❖ If we ask where this faith comes from, we'll understand better if we see this grand sweep of the biblical narrative in the background.

## Who was Zechariah?

- ❖ So who was Zechariah?
- ❖ Luke tells us that he belonged to the priestly division of Abijah, one of the families that traces its origin to Moses'

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 3:15

<sup>2</sup> Chaturvedi Badrinath, a Hindu scholar of world religions.

<sup>3</sup> Newbiggin, *A Walk*, 4. See also Newbiggin, *Gospel*, 89

brother Aaron. Zechariah's wife Elizabeth was also a descendent of Aaron.

- ❖ They were in the line of the Levites, the tribe entrusted with the priestly duties of Israel.
  - ❖ That means that Zechariah and Elizabeth had grown up as active participants in the story of Israel and her God. They were pastor's kids.
  - ❖ That means that Zechariah had the right credentials – he was God's priest serving God's people in God's place, the temple.
- ❖ And this was an auspicious day for Zechariah: He was actually only one of about 18,000 priests, so he would only serve in the temple twice a year. But it was a once in a *lifetime* honour to draw the lot and take the incense into the holy place.
- ❖ So not only was he in the right place, it was the right time – the one and only time that he would lead this holy worship and prayer.

### Zechariah's Faith

- ❖ Luke highlights Zechariah's qualifications and the timing of this moment to show that what was about to happen was a part of God's plan.
- ❖ But why Zechariah and not one of the other 17,999 priests? Most if not all of them would also be Levites. He would not be the only one to offer the incense and prayer.
- ❖ We can't know the Lord's motivations for sure, but Luke does say something important about Zechariah and Elizabeth. We find it in verse 6:
  - ❖ "Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly."

### A living faith

- ❖ Righteous, obedient, and blameless. Luke *commends* this couple to us, and these exemplary qualities are great talking points.

- ❖ You might then think it's a bit weird that I've chosen to talk about Zechariah's faith.
- ❖ The text doesn't talk about his faith – or, not positively. As we get into the story we find that right at the most critical point, Zechariah *didn't believe* the angel.
- ❖ That's not exactly a shining example of faith, is it? So why is it that I say Zechariah had a great faith?
- ❖ Well, it *is* here in the text, but it's not explicit. I can affirm Zechariah's faith because the text shows us how God sees Zechariah and his wife: "Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly."
- ❖ What is **faith**?
- ❖ Faith is when we believe, isn't it? When we're *really* certain that something is true.
- ❖ But how do we *know* if somebody believes something? How does somebody else know if we believe?
- ❖ If we say so? Yes, we notice if someone expresses a strong conviction. But we also make some kind of internal evaluation of what they're saying.
  - ❖ Do they *really* believe this, or are they just saying it because people want to hear?
  - ❖ Can I trust this person? What do I know about him – does he keep his promises?
  - ❖ Is the conviction confirmed by action?
- ❖ My kids sometimes say to me, "Daddy, if you just buy this one thing, we won't ask for anything else, for three months!" Do I believe that? ...
- ❖ I'm convinced that Zechariah was a person of great faith, not because he says so, and not even because the text says so in so many words, but because he obeyed God.
- ❖ Do you remember the Israelites of Isaiah's time? They observed the religious festivals, but they were corrupt and defiant before the Lord.

- ❖ And of course the Lord knew it: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”<sup>4</sup>
- ❖ Two weeks ago I quoted another phrase from Isaiah: “Your incense is detestable to me.”
- ❖ Yet here we see Zechariah going into the temple to burn incense – and being visited by an angel. That’s a pretty powerful sign of God’s approval.
- ❖ The difference between Zechariah and the Israelites of Isaiah’s time is that Zechariah *lived by God’s word*. And that *has to mean* that he believed it – that’s the only credible explanation for his observance.
  - ❖ He believed in God’s promises, so he waited in faith to see them fulfilled.
  - ❖ He believed God’s warnings, so he walked in the fear of the Lord.
- ❖ His faith was *visible* to the people around him. It was visible to God – the text says that Zechariah and Elizabeth were *righteous* in the sight of the Lord.
- ❖ So the first thing we can say about Zechariah’s faith is that he had a *living faith*.
- ❖ He believed in the living God, and it showed in the way that he was living his life.
- ❖ In a few minutes I want us to look at the implications of this.
- ❖ Before we do, let’s look at what happened next.
- ❖ His first reaction on seeing the angel is fear. The angel calms him – “Do not be afraid” ...
- ❖ And *then* he says, “your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.”
- ❖ “Your prayer has been heard” – Zechariah was a man of prayer.
  - ❖ It seems clear that the specific prayer was that his wife would have a child.
  - ❖ But it’s also clear that this prayer was against the odds – we’re told that Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and that both she and Zechariah were very old.
  - ❖ Yet he still prayed. He was a person of faith.
- ❖ The *answer* to his prayer was more than he could have imagined.
  - ❖ This son “will be a joy and a delight ...
  - ❖ He will be great in the sight of the Lord ...
  - ❖ He will be filled with the Holy Spirit ...
  - ❖ He will bring back the people of Israel to their God.
  - ❖ He will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah ...
  - ❖ [He will] make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”
- ❖ Zechariah is to name this son John. In Hebrew it means “Yahweh is gracious.”
- ❖ This John is John the Baptist, the one who will prepare the way for the Messiah. (That was another prophesy of Isaiah, by the way).

## Faith challenged

- ❖ God chose Zechariah and Elizabeth to play a critical role in the coming of the Messiah. An angel appeared to him to announce what that would be.
- ❖ The angel’s first words give us another reason to affirm Zechariah’s faith.
- ❖ Zechariah’s prayer has been answered; his hope has been exceeded; Yahweh has shown his grace to the man of prayer and faith.
- ❖ So, his faith is strengthened, right? *Not so: [---tentatively---]* “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 29:13

- ❖ There's a new dynamic in Zechariah's life of faith. His faith is *challenged*.
- ❖ Zechariah lived in the great narrative of Israel's God and Israel's hope; he kept God's commands; he walked in righteousness; he *prayed* the prayer of faith ...
- ❖ Now, God's angel is standing before him and saying that his prayer has been answered – *and he doubts*.
- ❖ We know the rest of the story. The angel announces his name: "I am Gabriel"; his credentials: "I stand in the presence of God"; and his mission: "I have been sent to tell you this good news."
- ❖ Gabriel tells Zechariah, the old man, that he will be an expecting father. But *now* he'll be a *silent* expecting father. He won't be able speak a word until after his child is born.
- ❖ What's happened to our man of great faith?
- ❖ Yes, there's more to the story:
  - ❖ Outside the temple there is great excitement over these happenings; the people understand that Zechariah has seen a vision.
  - ❖ And Elizabeth *does* get pregnant, so there's excitement and joy in Zechariah's home.

## Reflection: Zechariah's faith and ours

- ❖ But what can we learn from Zechariah if we are trying to understand this as a story of faith?
- ❖ We've seen two movements in this journey – he's moved from a *living faith* that comes from obedience, to a *challenge to faith* that comes just as God is answering his prayer.
- ❖ I believe we have Zechariahs (and Elizabeths) here with us this morning.
- ❖ I'm going to ask three questions that come out of this exploration of faith. As I do, I invite you to reflect:

- ❖ If you've experienced God's grace or blessing from Zechariah's story, give thanks ...
- ❖ If you are encouraged by Zechariah's example, ask God to keep you encouraged ...
- ❖ If you are challenged, or if Zechariah's story highlights an area of struggle, ask for the Lord's help ...
- ❖ I didn't plan it this way, but it turns out that these questions have a past, present and future dimension.

## Past dimension: What's the foundation of our faith?

- ❖ Zechariah's faith was grounded in the faithfulness of God – in that great narrative of creation and covenant and promise and fulfilment.
- ❖ It was grounded in history – in the calling of Abraham, in the liberation and election of Israel, in the raising up of King David and in the prophesies of the Messiah.
- ❖ I believe there are Zechariahs and Elizabeths among us because you and I are a part of that history.
  - ❖ If you've been in the church since you were young, or for a long time, you probably have a strong sense of this.
  - ❖ If not, be encouraged, because you're part of the narrative too. Christian faith is not something out of a novel or trending on BuzzFeed. It's based on real events and the purposes of God.
  - ❖ The Christmas event was foretold by the prophets. It's not rumor or speculation
- ❖ Christmas is a great time to remember and reflect on these foundations, and on God's plan for the world. It's a time to be strengthened in our faith.

## Present dimension: Is our faith visible?

- ❖ Is it a living faith? Does it make a difference in our lives?
- ❖ If we want to live according to God's purposes, our faith should be able to be seen in our faithfulness to him.

- ❖ It was for Zechariah. He believed in God's promises and he wanted to be part of them. He believed in God's warnings and took them seriously.
- ❖ "He observed all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly."
- ❖ I believe there are Zechariahs and Elizabeths among us today because we want to be faithful; we want a *living* faith, we want to *grow* in our faith.
- ❖ When we look at Zechariah we see that faith needs to be demonstrated in every area of our life.
  - ❖ The command to love our neighbour is equally applicable in our workplace as it is in the church community.
  - ❖ Honesty is required just as much at tax time as it is in our families.
- ❖ If you are like me, you'll see this as a call to examine ourselves: *Is our faith real, visible, living, in all areas of our life? If it's not, what do we need to do?*

### Future dimension: Are we bringing our future to God?

- ❖ Zechariah brought his sadness, his hurt, his wife's feeling of disgrace, to the Lord in prayer.
- ❖ It's the natural thing to do, isn't it, if we believe – to pray about our needs, our concerns, our hopes, our doubts; our need for guidance. And yet it's easy to forget.
- ❖ Without realizing it, we can start to think that some problems are *too difficult* for God.
- ❖ In reality it's *especially* the tough issues that we need to bring to him.
- ❖ Jesus told a parable of a widow showing up at an unjust judge's door in the middle of the night to plead for justice. The text very specifically says that Jesus told his disciples this parable "to show them that they should always pray and not give up."
- ❖ I believe there are Zechariahs and Elizabeths among us because we want to pray and we do pray.
- ❖ What is your prayer, for this Christmas? What does God want to do in your life –

could it be something against the odds, a goal out of reach, a reconciliation too difficult?

- ❖ Will you bring it to the Lord?

### Faith transformed

- ❖ What now about Zechariah's *disbelief*? God sent Gabriel to answer his prayer and announce an incredible blessing.
- ❖ Yet Zechariah questioned whether it could really be true. It turns out he's human, too.
- ❖ Have you ever prayed for something and then been completely surprised when God answered? I have.
- ❖ It seems like it couldn't be possible – I'm quite sure I didn't pray hard enough, or long enough, or sincerely enough for God to answer ... but then he answers anyway.
- ❖ Wow – so it wasn't dependent on me after all!
- ❖ God wants to see his purposes fulfilled in our lives, and in the world.
- ❖ But Zechariah wasn't quite ready to believe that God wanted to do this for him.
- ❖ So the Lord said, "I'm going to give you the opportunity to think about that, Zechariah – in silence, for about nine months.
  - ❖ Did Zechariah think about it? I think so.
  - ❖ Did Elizabeth get pregnant and have a baby? Oh yeah.
  - ❖ And what was his name? We can read what happened a little later in Luke's gospel.
  - ❖ Zechariah still couldn't speak, so he wrote on a tablet, "His name is John."
  - ❖ Luke tells us, "his mouth was opened, his tongue was set free, and he began to speak, praising God."
- ❖ And what do you think happened to Zechariah's faith? [---*rising sound and gesture*---]
- ❖ I think it shot straight up in the direction of heaven.

- ❖ And that was the third movement in Zechariah's journey of faith. It started with a living faith, then it became a faith under challenge. Now it is a faith renewed, supercharged, transformed.
- ❖ And what did he say? "Christmas is coming!" [---pause---]

### Approaching Christmas in Faith

- ❖ Actually Zechariah said it more eloquently than that.
- ❖ I'm going to conclude by reading a passage starting at verse 67 of Luke 1. This passage is known as Zechariah's song – Zechariah is the one speaking.
- ❖ As I read, listen for the things we've talked about – Zechariah's rootedness in the story of Israel and the faithfulness of God; his desire to serve the Lord; and now his complete confidence in God's future and the coming Messiah.
- ❖ This is Zechariah's song of faith:

### Zechariah's Song

<sup>67</sup> [John's] 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 to his people and redeemed them.

<sup>69</sup> He has raised up a horn 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 ancestors 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,

<sup>77</sup> to give his people the knowledge of salvation

through the forgiveness of their sins,

<sup>78</sup> because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

<sup>79</sup> to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death,