

## **“Doubting God”**

*Malachi 4:1-6 • Luke 1:5-25*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX  
Rev. Dr. Charles S. Blackshear • December 3, 2023

For Christians, today marks the beginning of the season of Advent. The word advent means “the arrival of a notable person, thing, or event.” People talk about the way our society deals with information changed dramatically with the “advent” of the personal computer. In the church, we are interested in the advent, or arrival, of the Messiah. This time of year most of us get very busy and often very stressed. Advent reminds us to slow down and wait. This is a time of expecting and preparing. As we approach Christmas, we are anticipating the celebration of the birth of the Messiah, but we are also anticipating his return. Jesus said he would come back as the conquering king who would make everything perfect. That’s what all of history is moving toward.

Anyone who has ever heard the story of Christmas knows that angels are an important part of that story. To help us prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, over the next few weeks we are going to look at three encounters with angels in the story of Jesus’ birth in the gospel of Luke. This morning we are going to look at the first angel encounter, which may surprise you because this story seems to be forgotten at Christmas. It’s the story of the birth of John the Baptist. It’s actually kind of amazing how much attention the gospels give to John the Baptist. The reason they do it, though, is that he is very important to the story of Jesus. So Luke weaves the story of the birth of Jesus with the story of John’s birth.

As we just heard, Zechariah is a priest, which means he comes from a family of priests. You didn’t decide to become a priest, you were born into it. His wife, Elizabeth, is also from a priestly family. Serving God is their family business. In the first century there were lots of priests. Scholars estimate that there were roughly 8,000 priests in Israel at the time. They were grouped into twenty-four divisions, with around 300 priests in each division. The divisions took turns serving in the Temple for a week at a time, twice

a year. From those 300 they would cast lots to determine who would get to perform the various responsibilities in the Temple. One of those responsibilities was to burn the incense on the golden incense altar inside the Holy Place of the Temple.

Only priests could enter this part of the Temple. It was where the golden lampstand and the table with the show bread was located, on each side of the altar of incense. All of these things were covered in gold. At the back of the Holy Place was the thick woven, ornate curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, where God’s presence was. When Zechariah was selected to burn the incense it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. This was the pinnacle of his career. Most priests never got to do it and those who were selected could never do it again.

So Zechariah puts on the priestly garments representing purity. He took the incense and entered into the Holy Place. His job was to put the incense on the altar at the same time the sacrifice took place outside and to offer the prayers of the people. The smoke from the incense, rising up into the air, represented the prayers of the people going to heaven. I’m sure the other priests who had done this in the past had told Zechariah how things would go. He was to get in, burn the incense, pray quickly, and then come back out to offer the blessing to all the people waiting outside. Incredibly meaningful but uneventful. Always the same.

Only this time it wasn’t the same. As he approaches the altar an angel is standing there. You and I think of angels as either cute or beautiful. Angels in the Bible are quite different. They come from the presence of God and they reflect God’s glory. Every time someone in the Bible encounters an angel, it says they are terrified. You would be, too. I know I would. Luke says that Zechariah was troubled, or terrified, and that fear or dread fell upon him. The other thing that is common to every

encounter with an angel in the Bible is that the angel says, “Do not be afraid.”

The angel says, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.” Zechariah and Elizabeth had never been able to have children. Verse 7 says it was because “Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.” Infertility is always heartbreaking, but in “ancient Hebrew culture, barrenness was considered a disgrace, even a punishment.” Kent Hughes writes, “Barrenness even carried a moral stigma because in Jewish thinking it was not the fate of the righteous. So Elizabeth had undoubtedly suffered smug reproach. She called her barrenness her ‘reproach’” in verse 25. People assumed that they had no children because God was punishing them for something.

Even today we need to be very careful about thinking that something that happens to us or to others is God’s punishment. As we will see, Elizabeth’s infertility was used by God for his glory. Whatever you are going through, rather than ask “why is this happening to me,” the better thing to ask is, “how can I glorify God through this?”

As you can imagine, Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed and prayed for years to have a child. By this time they probably had stopped hoping but they kept praying, maybe out of habit. But now this angel, this messenger of God, says, “your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.” Talk about a shock. We’re told that Zechariah and Elizabeth were old, but the truth is that in a time when the life expectancy was only about 45 years, they were probably pushing 40. But that meant that all their friends were grandparents.

This child they would have so late in life wasn’t going to be just any child. The angel tells Zechariah, “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. 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.”

The angel is quoting from the prophecies in the Old Testament. The passage we heard earlier, the fourth chapter of Malachi, is the very end of the Hebrew Scriptures. Not only is it the last book of the Old Testament, it was written last. Malachi chapter 4 was the last time the Israelites had heard from God for four hundred years.

In verse 5 God says, “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.” In other words, the prophet Elijah will return to prepare the way for the Messiah. And that’s John’s role. We are to understand that he is the voice “crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord,” fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 40.

It’s ironic that Zechariah, a priest who knew all of these prophecies, who is given the job of offering the prayers of the people while burning incense in the presence of God, who has been praying for years to have a son, who sees and hears a clear messenger from God, then doubts what he is told. How many of us do the same thing? We come to worship but we don’t expect to encounter God here. We pray but don’t expect God to answer our prayers. We find ourselves going through the motions but not believing in the supernatural power of God. As a result of his unbelief, Zechariah would not be able to speak until John was born.

As I studied this passage two things jumped out at me like they never had before. First, this is the gospel, the good news. Luke tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth “were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child.” He’s not saying they were sinless. I think the point Luke’s trying to make is that they did everything right according to the religion. The result, in most people’s mind, is that they should have received God’s blessing of

a child. And yet they didn't. It seemed like God was absent. Timothy Keller reminds us that this kind of thinking is actually a rejection of the gospel. If we believe we can earn God's favor by keeping the rules, or feeding the poor, or avoiding really bad sins, we have missed the point and have rejected Jesus just as much as if we walked away from him.

The Gospel is that there is nothing you can do to earn God's favor. We are all sinners in need of a savior. Jesus is that savior. He is God in person. God became human so that he could save us from our sin. The only thing we can do, then, is to respond to what God has already done in Christ. We respond by wanting to keep the commandments and feed the poor. We want to live holy lives because we love Jesus, not to get something from him.

That leads me to the other thing I realized. John's conception was not supernatural in the way Jesus' was. Zechariah and Elizabeth had to trust the word from God that the angel told him. They had to do their part, even when it seemed impossible. I can't even imagine how mute Zechariah was able to explain it to Elizabeth, but the point is that they believed. They partnered with God. You and I also need to partner with God to bring about sanctification in our lives. That simply means becoming more holy. The Holy Spirit makes us aware of sin in our lives and we work to get rid of that sin with God's help. That's what the Lord's Supper symbolizes. As you take the bread and the juice, I want to encourage you to think about the gospel. If you are still trying to earn your way to God, take this time to lay that down and simply receive what Jesus has done for you.

*Amen.*