

“ZECHARIAH’S ANGEL.”
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First Christian Reformed Church
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Scripture Texts: Luke 1:5-25

Introduction.

Our Advent sermon series this year is the angels of Christmas who stand in the presence of God and reveal God to us. I want us to see when eternity breaks into our world.

It is a strange and sad phenomena that surveys of Americans show more of them believe in angels than they do in God or Jesus or the Bible. But angels come from the presence of God to point us to God and Jesus.

It is like when you point at something for a young child to look at and all they do is stare at your finger. They are missing the point by looking at the pointer. Angels are just couriers, carriers, deliverers, messengers and it’s their message is that’s important, their message is earth shattering, history changing, life altering.

Luke 1:5-25

The Gospels of Mark and John begin with the ministry of Jesus. The Apostle Matthew begins his Gospel with the birth of Jesus. Luke does neither. Luke backs his story up to begin where Malachi ended. He starts at the end of the four hundred years of silence after Malachi. Luke starts when the voice of the Lord was heard again by the people of Israel.

You could say the NT starts in the OT. All the characters of the Christmas story were in the OT when this all started. Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, Simeon and Anna, they were all OT believers, clinging to the promises and prophecies of Yahweh to the children of Abraham.

We need to feel the tension, the expectation, the drama, the weariness of waiting four hundred years for God to speak. The significance of this first story in Luke’s Gospel is hard for us to fathom without feeling the weight of four-hundred years of silence.

The promises in Genesis 3 and 22 were about to be fulfilled. The seed of woman, the seed of God is coming, the one to sit on the throne of David, the lion of Judah, the prophetic weeks announced in Daniel 9, the consolation of Israel. Everything was about to come together. 400 years of silence is interrupted by an angel of the Lord.

Luke starts the story, in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, focused on an obscure priest, from the hill country of Judah, and his barren wife.

This is God's way again and again. In a world full of rich and famous, high and mighty, proud and powerful, God chooses what is weak and foolish, what is of little consequence and significance.

Luke 1:6-7, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

We are told Zechariah and Elizabeth were both righteous before God walking blamelessly in all the commandments. What does that mean? They never sinned, never broke the Ten Commandments, never messed up? Yet Zechariah messes up a few verses later. How were they righteous before God?

In our break from the book of Romans don't forget Romans. They are justified and righteous the same way Abraham and David were. Their faith was counted as righteousness, or right standing before God. What follows in verse 6 is not the cause of their righteousness but the fruit or result of their righteousness. Their right standing led to right living. The two are never separated.

And when they sinned they turned to God for forgiveness. They were righteous through blood as we are. If you are trusting in Jesus for your forgiveness, then you are righteous and blameless because of the grace and blood of Jesus.

And did you know you can be righteous and blameless and barren? You can be righteous and blameless and experience the pain and trials and troubles of this life. Jesus said in this life you will have trouble. In God's plans there is always some pain.

There is a deep sadness hanging over this story. In the first century Jewish culture to be childless was one of the bitterest afflictions. And is it not true often those suffering the severest afflictions are also those pressed more deeply into the Lord and the path of holiness.

For how many decades did Zechariah kissed his dear bride good bye to go off to Jerusalem for a week to fulfill his priestly duties in the Temple, and how many decades did he serve and sacrifice and pour out his prayers with the blood that God would hear and answer?

In order to draw our hearts to the life to come, God will often bring trials that will cause us to hold this world in greater and greater contempt. Our minds and hearts are seldom moved to desire and long for the life to come unless we are first forced to let go of our grip on our present comforts, conveniences and pleasures.

In this life you will have trouble, and these are sent to purify our faith and prepare us for heaven.

Isn't this just like God. How many times in Scripture have we seen God do His greatest work in the most impossible of circumstances? At least seven times in the OT childless wives miraculously give birth to sons. God delights to shine this glory brightest in the face of human hopelessness and human weakness and human humble dependence.

Luke 1:11-12, Zechariah and Gabriel.

The priests of Israel were divided into twenty-four divisions or groups. Zechariah belonged to the division of Abijah, which was the eighth group (I Chronicles 24:10).

Each division of priests served one week twice a year at the Temple. The highest privilege of going into the Holy Place to put incense on the hot coals of the altar of incense was determined by casting lots. Priests were only permitted to do this service once in their life, a high point of a priestly career. Certainly something he would tell Elizabeth all about.

But that wouldn't be the half of it. Suddenly there was the presence of a holy angel from God. Suddenly heaven invades earth, suddenly eternity inhabits temporality. Suddenly the presence of God is in the presence of man.

And the presence is personal. Angels are not some impersonal force, like the force is with us. They are not an amorphous mass of spiritual energy.

The angel that comes to Zechariah has a personal name, Gabriel. He speaks to Zechariah very personally about very personal matters. He says he has been sent by God to do God's bidding, to bring a personal message from God to him and

Elizabeth. The angel self-consciously uses the personal pronoun “I.” Both angels and humans belong to the realm of the personal.

Zechariah was troubled, no doubt terrified. Fear overcame him.

Why? What happens when heaven breaks into our world? What do we immediately become aware of?

Our weakness in the face of such power, our impurity in the face of such perfection, our guilt and corruption in the face of such holiness, our finitude in the presence of the infinite.

The supernatural is breaking into the natural. Another world is breaking into ours.

What would it be like for us to hear this fresh, as for the first time, to see tangible signs of transcendence, heaven bending down to touch the earth. God condescending to us to touch us and be with us and become one of us. To experience the distance between heaven and earth becoming so thin.

Luke 1:12-17, What the angel said.

The angel comes to make an announcement, a prediction about a miraculous event. The Lord has heard all your prayers and now is ready to answer for His glory.

You will have a son and you will name him John.

He will give you joy, and many others.

He will be great before the Lord, in the presence of God.

He will be set apart; he will not be like everyone else. He will live under a Nazarite vow.

He will be a blessing not only to you but to all of Israel.

He will turn many back to the Lord their God.

Take heart those of you who have been pleading with God in prayer for years or decades. A delayed answer doesn't mean no answer or rejection. Your prayers are not in vain, they are heard.

Notice the most important thing said about John. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit. And for that reason he will be a source of joy and gladness for many.

What do we want for our children and grandchildren more than anything else? That they be filled with the grace of God, that they be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is better than beauty, brains, strength, athletic ability, riches, good jobs.

Pray they will be great in the sight of the Lord, rather than great in the eyes of men. May they have greatness that is recognized in another world rather than this one. If we have reward in heaven we have enough.

Luke 1:18-23

Zechariah's response shows he has forgotten his faith in asking. Zechariah pushed back, what about the facts of life, what about our age, what about Elizabeth being far beyond childbearing age. How can this be? How shall I know this?

Was Zechariah's question different from Abraham's when he was told he would have a son in old age? Or from Mary's?

In the final analysis, we must trust God who knows men's hearts to make the right judgment. Gabriel discerned something different in Zechariah's heart. He thought God was limited by nature and science, limited by what was impossible. His sin was the sin of unbelief.

Zechariah receives a stern rebuke from the angel because of his unbelief in the sight of so many proofs, an angel who stands in the presence of God, who knows his name and knows his wife's name and knows his prayers, and has quoted the well-known last words of Malachi to him.

Zechariah was a priest, a well-trained Jew. He should have remembered the stories of the births of Isaac, Joseph, Samson, and Samuel. He ought to have remembered God is the God of the impossible.

He fell into mere human thinking, worldly reason and sense. What about us? What don't we believe, what do we question, doubt? Will the day come when we will wish we had taken God at His Word about life, marriage, parenting, disciplining children, about sex and sexual immorality, obeying our parents, about tithing, about obeying His Word, about repenting and forgiving.

“Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. Lord, increase my faith.”

“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.”

“Zechariah, don’t you realize who I am? Don’t you realize I stand in the presence of the Lord? I am speaking to you on the authority of God. I know what I am talking about, I am not making this up. I know who you are and what God is going to do to you.”

Gabriel’s words were a rebuke and in a way a reassurance, a negative and a positive. Yes, he was struck mute for his unbelief, his lack of faith, but they were also proof of Gabriel’s words. If this word of Gabriel came true immediately then surely Gabriel’s other words would come true in time. If the threat of being speechless was true, the promise of a son was more true.

When you hear the Word of God, believe it, and when you receive a rebuke from the Holy Spirit, be humbled by it and realize in it is the love of God and assurance He is at work in your life.

May we tremble at our sin and unbelief before a holy God. The essence of all sin is unbelief, lack of faith, disbelief in God and His Word and wisdom and will. It is a denial of God, it is saying God is a liar.

Implications and application.

This Christmas story requires us to accept the supernatural, the invisible, the presence of spiritual beings from somewhere beyond our visible, physical universe. It requires us to accept by faith things written about and told from a long ago and far away place.

Do you know why the stories of the incarnation are so important? Because we live in a materialistic, temporal, physical, closed world. We think science is god, whatever science can tell us is true and nothing else is, our world is completely limited by our five senses.

Most people think this is all there is. What is seen is real, what is unseen is unreal. They are living in a world without windows. Can you imagine living in a world with no windows, no sunshine? In a prison cell, in solitary confinement, in a Hamas tunnel?

How do you keep from going crazy in a windowless world, in a meaningless world, in a world where there is no meaning to our origin and no meaning to our destiny?

I will tell you how you survive in a world like that. You create weapons of mass distraction, mass diversion, mass entertainment, movies, TV, screens, social media, whatever it takes so we don't have to think too deeply about how meaningless our windowless reality is.

Zechariah had slipped into materialistic thinking. Angels force us out of our materialistic, closed world. They remind us there is much more to reality than just our stuff, just what we can experience with our five senses, much more than what science can quantify, explain or prove.

Christmas challenges us materialistic, pragmatic, rational people. The angels of Christmas open our eyes, open our hearts, open our minds to what is real, true, holy.

Angels, predictions, miracles, speechless priest, 80-year-old pregnant women, are not just part of the story, but essential to the Gospel and how God works in our world and in our lives. Why? Because we *must* know there is a supernatural world and it breaks into our world.

Christianity and the Gospel and Christmas are completely meaningless without it. The only salvation offered to all mankind is only from an almighty, supernatural, miracle-working God who created and sustains and is redeeming mankind.

The angels of Christmas open the windows to an unseen reality, to a meaningful reality, to the reality of the invisible world that is real, more real than our visible world.

The signs of God's work are everywhere. His glory is displayed in creation. His moral law is written on our consciousness. God has given us spiritual souls made for a spiritual reality. God has put eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

As Augustine famously said in his Confessions, "God has made us for Himself and our hearts are restless until they find the rest in Him."

With these desires come signals, signs, sightings, angels. They point to a Creator and a Savior. We see the unseen realm with the eyes of faith which are just as real and reliable as the eyes of sight.

Are you doubting and questioning like Zechariah?

Or worse yet, are you completely unchanged by the in breaking of God into our world, remaining cold, blind, deaf. If so you will be without excuse when you enter the unseen world and stand before the unseen real God and face an unseen real, eternal judgment.

First, the angels of Christmas should trouble us out of our complacency, out of our shallowness, out of our windowless thinking, to ask who am I and why am I here and what is God doing in my life? Life has deep spiritual and eternal significance, wake up to it.

Second, these angels of Christmas reveal the presence of God to us and His character and glory. They are pointing us to Jesus and His heavenly kingdom for which we should long and desire.

The God who reveals Himself in intense personal encounters is the same God who comes to each of us as individuals by faith in Jesus Christ through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Third, they reveal the kindness and grace of God to us showing us a God who is with us. He wants to be with us and delights to be with us and to have communion with us. With the eyes of faith see what is unseen at this table.

II Corinthians 4:6, 17-18 God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

17 For [our] light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.