

Here's Your Sign

Luke 1:5-25

Sunday, December 13, 2020, Aledo UMC

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Sermon Text, Luke 1:5-25 by Pastor Dave

⁵ 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. ⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ 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."

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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."

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²² 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.

²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ "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."

Sermon, "Here's Your Sign" by Pastor Dave

Back in the days before prenatal ultrasonography was commonly used, I heard the story of a country doctor who was often asked by young couples if they were having a boy or a girl. The doctor would ask the mother-to-be, "What do you think you're having?"

If the mother said, "I think I'm having a boy," then the doctor would say, "I think so too." Then, after the couple left, the doctor would write "girl" on the patient's chart.

Months later, if the mother had a boy, she'd say, "Doc, you were right! How did you know?" He'd just shrug it off to years of experience. But if she gave birth to a girl, she'd say, "Doc, you said I was having a boy and I had a girl. You were wrong!" Then the doctor would get out the patient's chart, open it and say, "What do you mean? It says 'girl' right here on your chart."

That little story illustrates the enormity of the angel Gabriel's prophetic announcement in Luke 1. Gabriel announced to Zechariah that he and his wife Elizabeth were going to have a son. If God had not been behind the prophecy, then Gabriel would've had just a fifty percent chance of being right.

But there were even greater odds going against Gabriel: the archangel went on to make bold predictions about the boy's life and future. He said his name was to be John and that he would become the forerunner of the Messiah.

But the greatest odds Gabriel faced concerned the fact that Zechariah and Elizabeth were old. Elizabeth's biological clock had stopped ticking decades before. They were both well beyond normal child-bearing years.

It seems as though Zechariah knew all those odds were against him, for upon hearing the good news that he is to become a father—and not merely a father, but the father of the forerunner of Messiah himself—Zechariah blurts out, "How can I know that God's promise is true for me?"

It's a question which many of us may find ourselves asking at some point in our life: *How can I know that God's promise is true for me?*¹

In essence, Zechariah asks for a sign.

Hey, Zechariah, you want a sign? Here's your sign. There's an angel of God standing right in front of you, next to the altar of incense. And he's talking to you, Zechariah. How much more of a sign do you need?

It's easy for us to poke fun at Zechariah's doubts, thinking that it would be different for us. After all, if an angel appeared in front of our noses, we would believe, wouldn't we? And if we had received such a direct promise from God, we would trust God and rejoice in him, wouldn't we?

That, of course, assumes that we're so much more "spiritual" than Zechariah—whatever that means. But who was Zechariah?

First of all, he was a deeply religious man. He was a leader in the religious life of his community. Yet he was filled with a question that would not go away: *How can I know that God's promise is true for me?*

I suspect that it was a question which haunted him not just for a few moments in the temple as the angel Gabriel spoke to him; I suspect that it was a question that had haunted him throughout his adult life. *How can I know that God's promise is true for me?* And once he was given the opportunity, he asked the question in verse 18: "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years."

I find this story to be beautiful both in its hope and in its simplicity. And yet, I find within it something that is really quite disturbing. Maybe that's why this particular passage is never included in the Revised Common Lectionary.

¹ Rueben P. Job in *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God*, Upper Room Books, 2006, pg. 29f

I find it disturbing because for years I have preached that if you have doubts or fears or complaints, you should take them to the Lord in prayer. Many of us are reading *A Calendar of Devotions* by Jenny Smith, and she is certainly taking that approach in many of her devotionals. And why not? Didn't someone in scripture pray, "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief!"² I'm convinced that God's shoulders are big enough for you and your concerns. I'm convinced that there's nothing you can pray that God hasn't heard before.

I've preached that based on my understanding of the scriptures, especially the Psalms and the Book of Job, both of which are filled with godly people saying some rather ungodly things to God. So when I read where Zechariah reveals his doubts to God's messenger, I want to pat him on the back and say, "Zechariah, I'm so thankful that you were so honest before God."

After all, didn't our teachers tell us—and don't you who teach still say—that there's no such thing as a stupid question? But Luke points to Zechariah and says, "You think there's no such thing as a stupid question? Look at verse 20. According to Gabriel, *that's* a stupid question!"

Look at what Gabriel says to Zechariah, "You want a sign? Here's your sign: since you didn't believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born."

There's no question that Zechariah expresses doubt. Yet I'm troubled by the fact that Zechariah asks this question and is struck speechless—and if you look ahead to verse 62, he may have been struck deaf as well for the next nine months. It seemed like such a harsh punishment for such a simple question. And yet, I found myself asking, Why this punishment? And why for so long?

Most of the commentaries I consulted focused on God punishing Zechariah for his unbelief, as if to say that Zechariah is getting what he deserves: how dare Zechariah question the promises of God!

And while that's certainly one aspect of this story, I couldn't shake off the feeling that there's more to it than that. There seemed to be a greater truth behind Zechariah's God-imposed silence. And why choose *silence* as a method for punishment in the first place?

First of all, remember where Zechariah's silence begins: in the Temple. It's as if Zechariah himself becomes a living example of Psalm 46:10—"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"

God is exalted in Zechariah's loss of speech and hearing. But how is God exalted?

Zechariah's silence could only be attributed to the miraculous workings of God. And it came at a time when people needed to see God at work. After all, it would be a couple of years before John the Baptist would be able to speak; it would be many more years before he would be able to "prepare the people for the coming of the Lord."

If it weren't for the silence of Zechariah, it would simply be too easy to pass off John as just an ordinary boy. But John was far from ordinary, and his father's silence—his father's loss—marked John as God's chosen servant. Zechariah's loss of speech and hearing became signs of hope to others that God was on the cusp of doing something great: the day of the Lord's appearing will soon arrive!

And when Zechariah regained his ability to speak and to hear, it only added to the miraculous nature of God's plans.

² Mark 9:24

What if Zechariah had never expressed his doubts to Gabriel? Then God's people would've never had the sign of Zechariah's silence that God was about to crash into human history—in human flesh—to take up residence in our neighborhood and bring hope and salvation to all humanity!

And with that we come back to that critical question: *How can I know that God's promise is true for me?*

Was Zechariah wrong to ask that question? I can't answer that. But I can tell you that God transformed Zechariah's doubts into a sign of hope for the whole world.

So what are we to do with our doubts and questions? Questions such as—

- “How can I know God?”
- “How can I trust God to provide for me in the middle of this pandemic?”
- “How can I know God is guiding me?”
- “What if I am listening to my own desire and not to the voice of God?”
- “How can I know God has really forgiven me?”
- “How will I know God really loves me as an individual?”
- “How can I know that God's promise is true for me?”

These are the nagging questions that lurk close in many of our lives and I see no value in stilling our tongue and locking such questions away in our hearts. To deny those questions is to give them power they do not have or deserve. Yet to face such questions honestly and directly is to face up to our own lack of faith.

So what shall we do? First of all, don't let your doubts or your questions immobilize you. Zechariah had doubts, but he continued praying, serving and listening for the voice of the Lord.

Secondly, take your doubts and your questions to the Lord—there's no better place for them. But let me add just one word of caution: please know that if you express those doubts out loud, God just might use you in some mysterious and miraculous way to bring hope and promise to others.

Finally, let me assure you that God sent Jesus into the world in order to fulfill his promise to redeem—not just the Jews, but all humanity. God's promise is true for you. He may not have promised you worldly goods, but God has promised to be with you even unto the ends of the age. God has promised to give you life, and life abundantly. And God has promised to one day lead you into everlasting life.