

A Promise Too Good to Believe

I. What Zechariah Doubted

II. God, in Mercy, Fulfilled

Tell me, have you ever been in a situation where you saw or heard something that seemed too good to be true? You just couldn't believe it? Maybe you stopped at a rummage sale and you found an item that was like brand new, still in the box. And you know it's worth like maybe \$40 or \$50. And you look at the tag on it and it says \$2. Wow! You can hardly believe your eyes. Or maybe you're out fishing and you hook into what you first think is a snag. And then it starts moving and you figure it's a big carp or a sturgeon but when it finally comes to the surface, you see that flash of a white tail and everybody in the boat shouts, "It's a walleye!" And before you know it there's this trophy walleye laying in the bottom of the boat. It's like too good to be true. Or maybe, your daughter and son-in-law stop by your house with a card that has a little scratch off piece. And so you scratch it off and it reads, "Only the best parents get promoted to be grandparents." And you're thinking, "Wait a minute, what? Does that mean what I think it means? Are you kidding me? That's awesome! That's like too good to believe!"

Sometimes it happens, doesn't it? We receive some good news that is almost beyond our ability to comprehend. It leaves us dumbfounded, even speechless. Well, in our text for today, we meet a man who received just such a piece of good news. It came in the form of a promise made by an angel. For a man named Zechariah, it really was, what you might call,

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But as we will see in our meditation today,

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II. God, in mercy, fulfilled

The biblical account that we have before us takes us back to the city of Jerusalem about 500 years after the Israelites had returned from captivity and rebuilt the temple. The priests were continuing to carry out the ceremonial practices prescribed by the laws of Moses, offering up sacrifices and burning incense. In fact, the various descendants of Aaron who served as priests rotated through the various functions that had to be performed. When the time came for Zechariah to be the one to enter the Holy Place and offer up prayers and incense on behalf of God's people, he was undoubtedly both honored and humbled, for he and his wife were devout believers. What does Scripture say? *Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. (Luke 1:6)*. And yet, in spite of the God-pleasing lives they were living, they both were carrying a physical and emotional burden. Luke tells us, *They were childless because Elisabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. (Luke 1:7)*

Undoubtedly, this was something that was weighing on them. When you consider that, in those days, children were considered to be a direct blessing from God, not to mention a form of a retirement package to take care of you in your old age, it's no wonder that Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying for years that God would grant them a child. But now they were well past the age of child bearing—or so it seemed.

But what happened? While Zechariah was burning incense in the temple, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and said, *"Zechariah, your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth*

*will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.” (Luke 1:13)* You think about that a minute. These days it's not uncommon for parents to announce the arrival of a newborn baby with a little postcard: John Robert weighed in at seven pounds 9 ounces on December 2nd to the proud parents of Glenn and Michelle. And of course, it's not unusual for parents to announce the expected arrival of a child, like my daughter did. But for someone to announce the expected conception of a child, especially to two people who are old enough to be grandparents themselves, who are well beyond the age of childbearing, well, that just doesn't happen. And who would believe it if it did? Well, apparently, not Zechariah. After the angel not only tells Zechariah that he's going to have a son, but also what he was to name him, and what this child would do, namely, *“make ready a people prepared for the Lord,” (Luke 1:17)*, what was Zechariah's response? Zechariah said to the angel, *“How can I be sure of this?”*

Now, at first blush, we might think, well that's a natural question. I mean the promise that the angel had just made him was a little far-fetched, wasn't it? Isn't Zechariah just looking for a little confirmation that what the angel was telling him was the truth? No, actually, when Zechariah says, *“How can I be sure of this?”* he's saying more than, *“I need a little more information”* or *“Exactly how is this going to work?”* or *“Can I have a sign to confirm what you're saying is true?”* No, when Zechariah said, *“How can I be sure of this?”* he basically meant, *“God, I doubt it. I can't believe that what you're telling me is true.”* We know that's what Zechariah meant, because of the way the angel responds to Zechariah's request. 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. 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. (Luke 1:19-20)* In other words, the angel basically said, *“Zechariah, because you did not believe God's promise, because you demanded some additional proof that this was going to happen, because you needed some kind of sign, I'll give you a sign. The sign is this. You will lose your ability to speak until the day this promise is fulfilled.”*

Boy, you think about how that must have impacted Zechariah. I mean, here you are, a priest in God's Temple. You're expected to go into the courtyard and speak the Aaronic Blessing over the people, and you are completely mute. You can't say a word. I'll bet that freaked everybody out. (Kind of like the time a few years ago, when that I stepped into this pulpit acting like I was Zechariah, unable to speak. And the ushers came running up, thinking I was having a stroke. That was awkward.) Or how about the fact that even though Zechariah's wife was about to conceive this miracle baby, this child which the angel said would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he was born—still you can't speak a word of it to anybody? Wouldn't that be hard? To go over 9 months without being able to tell anyone that good news that your wife is expecting a baby, that you're about to be a papa! But that's what Zechariah had to endure, 9+ months of silence, all because he failed to believe God's promise. He doubted that what God said would come true.

Tell me, can you imagine what would happen if God were to impose that same penalty on you or me, any time we failed to believe one of God's promises? For example, when God says *“Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you,”* and we say, *“I don't know if you can get me out of this mess, God.”* Or when God says that in all things he works for the good of those who love him, we say, *“I don't know how a global pandemic is going to serve my good.”* Or when God says, *“Don't worry about tomorrow because I already know what you need today,”* we say, *“I don't know about that, God. I think I better still worry about tomorrow.”* Truth be told, if God were to shut down our ability to speak every time we doubted him or failed to believe his

promises or demanded a little more explanation for what he's up to, chances are, this would be one quiet room. Isn't that right? Who of us has not been guilty of leaning on our own understanding, rather than trusting in God with all our heart, as God calls us to do?

So the question is, why did God put Zechariah through this silent treatment? Why did he tie his tongue for the length of Elizabeth pregnancy? I expect there were at least two reasons. 1. This was God's way of calling Zechariah to repentance. God wanted to teach his servant the error of his ways. Just like a parent might send little Johnny to his room to think about what he had just said or done, so God was giving Zechariah a major time out, a 9-month time out, to not only think about his attitude toward God's promise, but more importantly think about this child that was now growing inside of Elizabeth. And secondly, God gave Zechariah this season of silence to kind of set the stage for a dramatic fulfillment of the promise God had made to him. For after Elizabeth conceived and gave birth to a son, just as God said, the time came for the child to be circumcised and be formally given his name. And even as everyone was expecting the child to be named after his father or another relative, what did Zechariah do? He asks for a writing tablet, likely a board with wax poured over it. And with his stylist, he scrawled the words, "*His name is John*"—just as the angel had declared over nine months earlier. And with that statement of faith, with that declaration that God's will be done, Zechariah's tongue was set free.

And what's the first thing out of Zechariah's mouth? Does he say "Man, that was the longest 9 months of my life. I think that was cruel and unusual punishment?" No, what does Zechariah do? He praises God! Luke tells us, *Immediately [Zechariah's] mouth was open and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. (Luke 1:64).*

In fact, Luke goes on to say, *Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied.* And what did Zechariah prophesy about? He focuses on two promises that God had made to him. First, the promise of a Savior. Zechariah says, "*Praise be to the Lord the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.*" (Luke 1:68-69) That reference to the House of David ties Zechariah's words to God's promise to send a savior from the line of David. Zechariah knew that God had made good on that promise because Zechariah was now holding in his arms the one who God said would be the Forerunner of that savior. Zechariah's speaks about his newborn son with these words, "*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, to give people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God.*" (Luke 1:76-78)

"Because of the tender mercy of our God." Zechariah had already experienced that mercy of God in spades. Zechariah knew that he had once doubted God's promise. But rather than canceling that promise because of Zechariah's lack of faith, God, in mercy, fulfilled it. He gave Zechariah the son he so desperately wanted. And more importantly, he gave Zechariah the Savior he so desperately needed. And in the end, that's what put this song of praise on Zechariah's lips. In fact, it's a song that we still sing to this day. Whether it's in the form of the canticle called the Benedictus, or it's in the form of Hymn 275, which we will sing to close our service today, Zechariah's words are just as fitting for our lips as they were for his, especially during this season of Advent.

If you think about it, just like Zechariah, we are now expecting the birth of a baby. We are anticipating the birth of the one born to save us from our sin. Sometimes that promise seems too good to believe—that a holy God is going to rescue us from what really deserve. And therefore, just like Zechariah, there are times when we are tempted to doubt that promise, to say

that it's too good to be true. But rather than using our doubts to invalidate his promises to us, God, in mercy, has chosen to fulfill them all for us. He sent us his son, to live and die in our place. He sent us his son to give us full forgiveness for our sins. He sent us his son to assure us that when we breathe our last, or when Jesus returns in glory, whichever comes first, God will bring us to live with Jesus forever in heaven. And that, my friends, is a promise that is just too good to not believe. May God keep us all eagerly expecting him to keep all his promises, just as he has promised to do, for Jesus' sake. Amen.