

Ordinary People in God's Extraordinary Story: Zacharias and Elizabeth

Luke 1

December 15th, 2019

Big idea: God used Zacharias and Elizabeth to bring John into the world, who prepared the way for Jesus.

Intro

For adults in my generation, one particular item defined the Christmas season. I would like to say it was a nativity set. But that's not what I have in mind. No, I'm thinking of the Christmas edition of the Sears Catalog. For you young people, it's like they took the contents of Amazon and printed it out in a thick glossy magazine the size of a phone book, which you have also never seen before. We would study the catalog, marking down every item we wanted, knowing that there was no way we would get it all. But it represented hope. Would I get the robotic remote-controlled dog? Unlikely. Very materialistic hope focused on what we hoped to get on Christmas, but it filled the month with hope and anticipation.

Luke 1 takes place when the people were hoping for rescue, but the hope might have started to seem misplaced. It had been 400 years since God last spoke to the people through the prophet Malachi.

Malachi 4:5-6 "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. ⁶ "He will restore the hearts of the fathers to *their* children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse."

That was the last word from God. No prophets were sent with messages of judgment or prosperity. No angels. No kings. No deliverers.

Daniel Darling: Israel had been shaken by revolution and war in these years. Most of God's people were scattered among the conquering nations. Some had come back to the land with Zerubbabel and Nehemiah. The Syrians came and savaged the land and the people. Then a revolution by their own Maccabees brought temporary hope—only to be crushed by Pompey the Great, the Roman who brought Israel under bondage once again. Every day as they walked to the temple, built of course by Herod, the ruthless and illegitimate king of Israel, they saw the Roman flag waving in the wind, high above their land. Yet in the midst of the darkness, when it seemed all was lost and nobody could be trusted, God was silent ... but not sleeping. The Psalms remind us that the God of Jacob doesn't slumber or sleep (121:2–4). It might be a little trite to say that "darkness comes before dawn," but in this beleaguered land, amidst a downtrodden people, a new day was dawning. The faint hope of Malachi would be fulfilled.

And this fulfillment begins to be fulfilled through two ordinary people, Zacharias and Elizabeth. Zacharias was one priest in a division of priests. His division was one of 24 divisions of priests. He lived in the hill country outside of Jerusalem. Where he lives isn't even given a name – just "the hill country." The equivalent of driving on the freeway at night and seeing a collection of lights by themselves far from any exit or town. You know someone lives there and is making a life, but it's not significant enough to merit a sign or a name.

His division serves twice a year in the temple for a week at a time. Most of the jobs are unspectacular but necessary to facilitate worship in the age of sacrifice and human priests. All we know about Elizabeth is that she was also in the line of Aaron, although only the men were priests, and she wasn't able to have children, and it was a source of great pain for her. By the time our story begins she was old enough that the window for childbearing was closed and she had no more hope.

These figures are given a lot of detail in Luke 1 for people that are several steps removed from the Messiah. They were to raise John who would then prepare people for the Messiah. They were to prepare the preparer. Zacharias and Elizabeth don't make it into the nativity sets. Even if you buy an expansion pack you might get some additional animals, like a camel and a goat, or some extra wisemen, but Zacharias and Elizabeth still aren't

included. They were ordinary, godly people and God used them. Their ordinariness highlights the extraordinariness of what God was about to do.

1. **Faithful** lives with **empty** arms (1:5-10)

- a. They were righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord (v. 6)
 - i. Walked in openness and integrity before God, confessed and offered sacrifices when they sinned, trusted in God's provided means of forgiveness through priests and offerings.
- b. The other detail given about them is that they had no child because Elizabeth was barren.
 - i. It was to her a source of disgrace. Not that it needed to be. But people associated barrenness with God's disfavor, so there was the double pain of empty arms that longed to hold a child and judgmental assumptions of people who supposed that God must be punishing Zacharias and Elizabeth for something.
 - ii. There's a long line of godly women in the Bible who were unable to conceive. Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah – crying out to God in the temple, kneeling before God and begging Him to open her womb. Elizabeth is another in this line.
 - iii. The intentional description of their blamelessness and barrenness is designed to make clear their infertility was not because of some personal sin. The prosperity gospel is not new to our age. People have always tried to use physical flourishing to measure God's blessing. But this passage is one more strike against that ideology, and it reveals the cruel consequences of tying physical prosperity to God's blessings and physical suffering to God's displeasure. Pain and loss are multiplied by shame and guilt.
- c. The divisions of the priests were detailed in 1 Chronicles 24 and still followed in Zacharias' day.
 - i. Something happened that would only happen once in his life. He was selected by "random" chance to enter the temple and burn incense.
 1. Each division served two weeks a year. With 300 priests in a division, this was a rare privilege.
 - ii. Here's how Kent Hughes described what it might have been like:
 1. Then came the moment to step into the Holy Place. Before him rose the richly embroidered curtain of the Holy of Holies, resplendent with cherubim woven in scarlet, blue, purple, and gold. To his left was the table of showbread [the bread that symbolized God's presence]. Directly in front of him was the horned golden altar of incense (Exodus 30:1–10; Exodus 37:25–29). To his right stood the golden candlestick. Zechariah purified the altar and waited joyously for the signal to offer the incense so that, as it were, the sacrifices went up to God wrapped in the sweet incense of prayer.
- d. But this moment was interrupted.
 - i. God chose to use this moment, the climactic moment of a priest's career, to announce His decisive saving act.

2. Angelic **announcement** and human doubt (1:11-25)

- a. Ok, this is the character we expect to see in the nativity set – Gabriel, the angel. But that doesn't mean Zacharias expected to see him.

- i. He was troubled and gripped by fear. No one else was supposed to be in there. Yet, here was another being.
- b. His petition has been heard, your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son
 - i. What petition? His prayer and longing for a son? His prayer and longing for the messiah? Perhaps both. He will have a son and this son will prepare the way for the Messiah.
 - ii. There was probably a lifetime of praying for a child but also as a faithful Jewish priest there would have been a lifetime of praying for the Messiah. Both were about to happen in a way Zacharias could not have expected.
- c. Zacharias is told 6 things about this son
 - i. He will bring them joy – empty arms now full, but “many will rejoice at his birth” – all those waiting for the forerunner of the Messiah will rejoice but also as we will see their friends and family rejoiced with them.
 - ii. He will be great in the sight of the Lord
 - 1. **Luke 7:28** "I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."
 - iii. He will drink no alcohol – part of a nazirite vow
 - iv. He will be filled with the HS from birth – before Pentecost the filling of the HS was not permanent but was unique equipping for service
 - 1. **Jeremiah 1:5** "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."
 - 2. John was the last of the Old Testament prophets, his ministry bears strong similarities to that of Isaiah, giving strong calls for repentance while pointing to the Messiah. His ministry will be like that of Elijah, Gabriel says, calling God’s people to repentance. He would speak truth to power and lose his head for it (Darling).
 - v. He will bring many people back to God, evidenced by horizontal relationships as the hearts of fathers are turned back toward their children.
 - 1. Then as today, people wander from God and need to be directed back to Him who waits ready to receive them like the father waiting for the prodigal son.
 - vi. He will prepare people for the Lord
 - 1. This child would become a great man, but his greatness is found in pointing people to Jesus. He would later say of Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:30)
- d. Zacharias doubted. Mary also asked the question, “how can these things be?” when given an angelic announcement. But her question seemed couched in trust and wonder, whereas Zacharias seems laden with cynicism and doubt. That explains why as both a punishment and a sign he is made silent for 9 months.
 - i. His mouth is quieted so his heart can consider the news.
 - ii. Daniel Darling: And in a way, this affliction was less of a punishment and more of a gift from God. To not speak would be to sit in silence before God, to quiet the chattering of the soul and the noise of his circumstances. In a way, this is a work God seeks to do in the heart of all of us. Christmas is a good time to practice silence, . . . to put away the devices and the inputs that so

often keep us from faith. A priest, who often spoke words of blessing on God's people, would be silenced and would emerge with a renewed faith in the possibility of God's promise.

iii. For a few days this summer we camped someplace without cell coverage. It was glorious. I hadn't realized how distracted I had become by every beep on my phone or the desire to look down at it constantly to see what I'm missing "out there" instead of focusing on the people with me.

e. The next 13 verses turn to Mary's parallel experience before coming back to Elizabeth when Mary went to visit.

3. Their unborn **child** responds to Mary and the One she carries (1:39-45)

a. John leaped in her womb and Elizabeth cried out, knowing that the child Mary carried was even more significant than her own – Mary carried her "Lord."

i. Even though she was experiencing her own miracle and a surprising turn in her own story, she looked past herself to the unborn Christ. (adapted from Darling)

b. Flemming Rutledge: [Her cry of joy is] her response to that revelatory kick from John the Baptist, already vitalized by his destiny as "The prophet of the Most High [who will] go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins (1:76–77)."

i. John is already doing his job! Talk about a child-laborer; even in the womb he is fulfilling his role of pointing people to Jesus.

c. The camera angle focuses on Mary again in vv. 46-56 for her song before turning back to Elizabeth and Zacharias.

4. A **promise** fulfilled ignites hope of **more** to come (1:57-80)

a. She gave birth to a son. Family and friends rejoiced with her.

b. Zacharias' silence is broken after he writes the name, John. Interesting that it wasn't broken as soon as he was born. Perhaps it was unmuted only after showing obedience and trust that was lacking earlier.

i. Though faithful and blameless, Zacharias is still growing in trust, repentance, and obedience.

c. What will this child turn out to be?

i. Zacharias partially answered.

1. To do this great song justice would take a sermon in itself. It is loaded with OT imagery and quotes. We'll barely skip along the surface today.

ii. He sees his story, his ordinary life with his wife in the hill country outside Jerusalem, as part of something much bigger.

iii. Redemption was promised and about to be accomplished

1. "has visited" is used of a kind and compassionate visitation, like of a doctor visiting a patient. The same word is translated "concerned"

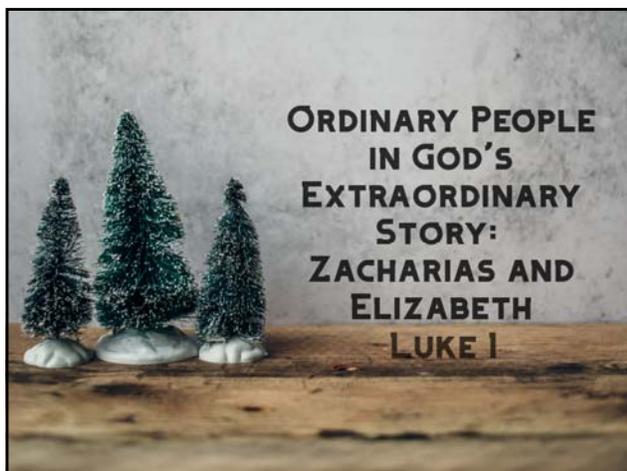
2. "has accomplished" points to the certainty of fulfillment

iv. Salvation is coming in the house of David

1. "horn" was used of strength, here it is strength to save

2. The promise was given to David that from his line would come one greater than him that would reign forever as the true and righteous king.

3. God is remembering His covenant with Abraham, to give the people a land, nation, and blessing that would echo out to all nations as all the nations of the earth would be blessed through Abraham.
 - v. This child will be “prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord”
 1. The sunrise was about to come to those in darkness.
5. What can we learn from Zacharias and Elizabeth?
- a. God uses **ordinary** means to accomplish extraordinary ends.
 - i. God gets the glory, not the human instrument. We’re not to read this and marvel and Zacharias and Elizabeth. We are to see God’s great redemption story unfolding through yet another person.
 - b. The **middle** of our story cannot predict the **end** of our story.
 - i. Zacharias and Elizabeth couldn’t have predicted the turn their life was to take in their older age.
 - ii. From faithful obscurity to prominence
 - iii. From bareness to parenthood
 - c. Nothing could hinder God’s plan to **save** through His **Son**.



1

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