

Sermon 29 November 2015
“Our Coming Saviour – Zechariah and Elizabeth”

Prayer: Lord, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable in your sight – our King and Messiah. Amen

‘The days are coming’ words of the Lord, faithfully spoken by Jeremiah. Normally the prophet of doom and gloom, but here the promise, *gracious* promise of a future secured by the Lord, and hope made real through a descendant of King David; a time when all people will have justice and all things will be ‘right’; a time when the “Lord Our Righteousness” will come among us. Our Christmas is no accident of fate, it has been planned for, allowed for, the need seen for, for a very long time by our Creator-God.

Now, in our Christian calendar we claim “the day” of Jeremiah’s prophecy to be the birth-day of Jesus. Jeremiah’s prophecy came true hundreds of years later and then we add more than 2000 years from “the truth”-day. The righteous branch from King David’s family was the baby born in Bethlehem, called Jesus. It is this baby’s arrival we celebrate all over the world, at a time we call ‘Christmas’.

As we here in St Johns celebrate Christmas this year our theme is: “Our Coming Saviour”. We wait for the coming of our Saviour. And **as we wait** we remember the last time he came; every year at this time in our calendars. We celebrate the coming of God into human skin; (remember last week’s quote from Zach Ferrell? “A thousand times in history a baby has become a king. But only once in history did a King become a baby”); we celebrate this gift of God to us – God with us, Immanuel; and we celebrate by re-telling the story as remembered by the people involved.

This year we begin our Christmas count down by hearing from Zechariah and Elizabeth, then from Herod, some shepherds, Joseph and Mary and an Innkeeper! Each week’s story will be accompanied by a video, yes from the USA (America) so I ask you ignore the ‘funny’ spelling☺, and accents of the actors! I imagine we’d struggle far more with the accents of Jesus ‘contemporaries’ – if they spoke English!

The story for today begins in Luke 1:57-66. Bob will read it for us

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbours. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him.

There are so many points of significance for us today from this story, we can but capture a few. One of the first to note is the challenging to ‘custom/ culture’ that Zechariah and Elizabeth did by calling their son ‘John’. Traditionally we are told, the first son would be named after the father. But Zechariah, held in silence until John’s naming day, called his son John – because the angel told him to! In the telling of this story, (*which* we must never forget is actually *God’s story*), the names of this family ‘now’ of 3, are rich in significance. Zechariah means ‘God remembers’ Elizabeth means “God is my oath.” And John means “God has been gracious.”

For this family by the time John was born they knew beyond any doubt that God had remembered their prayers – because they were ‘old’ beyond what we would call child-bearing age, and yet – John came. They knew beyond any doubt that God’s oath was given to Elizabeth and it came true. To this couple in their old age, the fact of a son being born to them was an act of God’s grace.

Let’s hear from Bob from Luke: Luke 1:7-10

But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. “Now while Zechariah was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.”

Unknown to most of us was that for Zechariah this was probably the most important day of his working life. He had been chosen by lot, to enter the Temple to burn incense, usually it was in- light / burn and then come out to signal to the people prayer time was over. But on this day when Zechariah went in to the temple to burn the incense he was met by an Angel.

Let’s hear from Bob from Luke: Luke 1:11-20

And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.’

And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” And the angel answered him, “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. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.”

It’s only fair to comment on just how much of a rough deal Zechariah gets! While doing his job – Zechariah, on the best day of his career because he has been chosen to burn the incense, he has Gabriel appear who says: “You’re going to be a dad.” Zechariah says: “What? How? I’m an old man.” And Gabriel replies: “Fine, you don’t get to talk until the baby is born.” Zechariah got nine months of “no comment” because he asked for more: more facts, more information, more details – like ‘how and when?’

Sometimes we forget the difference between Kairos = God’s time and Chronos = clock time. ^{1*} All of God’s words can and should be believed to come true in their appropriate time. From the beginning, God has been authoring a story that leads to salvation, deliverance, and restoration for all people, who will call upon his holy name. This is what Christmas is about. It is about the advent—or the arrival—of God. He’s following through on his promise and oath to bring a Deliverer—a Messiah.

This prayer is not only Zechariah and Elizabeth’s that the angel mentions in John 1:13—it is also the prayer that the people of God had been praying for years. Of course Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying for the birth and advent of the Messiah for their people, but they had also been praying for the birth and advent of a child of their own. God was about to answer both prayers through a faithful, married

couple who were advanced in years. We ask, “Why God, why?” a lot, even when we put our faith in God’s plan, we still ask: “When God When?”

And God makes us wait. Things happen in God’s time—not in our own. Elizabeth and Zechariah, both from priestly lineage, were about to give birth to a baby who we know became the prophet named John and was the gracious provision of God. John was the fulfilment of gladness and joy for Zechariah and Elizabeth, as well as the fulfilment of prophecies the Jewish people had been waiting on for centuries. The prophecies we claim find their fulfilment in John’s birth and life ie Mal 3:1 from earlier:

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming,” says the Lord of hosts.”

God remembered, God’s oath is being fulfilled and God’s graciousness is made real in John and this was spoken to Zechariah by the angel when – remember when Zechariah was still in the temple. The people were waiting and praying outside, a few eyes would have been on the clock – *it’s the ‘hour’ of prayer* I’m sure was being muttered – **hour** not 2 or 3... And there may well have been increasing anxiety – things of God – strange to us human, ‘happened’ in the Temple.. and finally Zechariah came out **but he was mute!**

The immediate effect was that he could not finish the day’s duty. When the priests came out to close of the hour of prayer – he would lead the people in Aaron’s prayer. We said it together today! We use Aaron (Moses brother) Aaron’s prayer blessing to close our baptism ceremony. For Zechariah that day – long ago – he couldn’t lead! What we know is that when he finished his week on duty – he went home.

Luke said: Bob reads Luke 1:23-25

And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people” (Luke 1:23-25).

Video:

Zechariah and Elizabeth had time to adjust – time to recognise that the promise, gracious promise of a future secured by the Lord, and hope made real for all people was being restored. That the coming of the prophet to fulfil ancient prophecy was in progress through them and it was happening in God’s time, God’s way, in them.

When their child was born, Zechariah’s silence was broken with a song that we call the Benedictus. Their child would be known as the John, prophet of the Most High. He was the ‘messenger’ called to prepare the road for the Messiah- King who came to deliver his people—just as had been promised.

When their child was born Zechariah found his voice, he sang! God remembered. God is my oath. God has been gracious.

This is the beginning of Advent, our time of counting down to celebrating ‘Our Coming Saviour’. Advent begins with a song. Amen