**The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold**

Luke 1:5-25

Key Verse: 1:13

*“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.’”*

Merry Christmas! I can’t believe that we are already at the end of year. In a few days, we are getting into December. Usually around this time, we start to see Christmas decorations and hear Christmas carols on the streets. But this year seems different from other years due to the COVID pandemic. Even though the Christmas mood may be changed, it is always meaningful to think about Jesus’ coming into the world. The author Luke begins his Christmas message by introducing an old couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, and the angel’s message regarding the birth of John the Baptist. The life of Zechariah and Elizabeth gives us inspiration on how to live as God’s people. We also think about the meaning of the birth of John the Baptist. May God open our hearts to accept the word of God, so that our faith may grow strong in the grace of Jesus Christ.

1. **They Were Righteous in the Sight of God (5-7)**

*Look at verse 5, “ 5In 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.”* The author Luke begins his narrative mentioning a historical background, “in the time of Herod king of Judea…” It gives us much information regarding the characteristics of the time. Who was Herod? He was also called “Herod the Great.” He was the king of Judea, but he was not a Jew, but an Idumean (Edomite), descendant of Esau, who had been hostile to each other throughout history. He was politically very clever and was appointed as a king of Judea by Caesar Augustus. He tried to get favor from the Jews, he married a Jewish woman from a prestigious and wealthy family and he also initiated extensive construction works in Jerusalem, including renovation on the Jerusalem temple, spending an enormous amount of money. However, the Jews never accepted him as their true king. He was very insecure about his throne and constantly feared conspiracy. He executed his wife, three of his sons, his mother-in-law, and also all babies under the age of two years old in Bethlehem and its region after hearing the news regarding the Birth of Christ (Mt 2:16-18). Many people suffered and felt hopeless because of this evil king.

*Look at verses 6-7, “6Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. 7But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.”* Zechariah and Elizabeth lived under such a cruel king. How about their personal life? They were old and childless. In those days, childless means more than just no child. It was considered shameful because their family line would end in their generation; it means no security, having no one to take care of them in their old age; furthermore, it was considered as God’s punishment (Exodus 23:25-16). Therefore, childlessness was an extremely difficult burden for a woman and her husband to bear in Jewish society. We can find such cases in the Bible like the stories of Rachel (Genesis 30), and Hannah (1 Samuel 1) in the Old Testament.

How did they live in such a time? There are two comments about their lifestyle, they were righteous in the sight of God and they were observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly (6). It doesn’t mean that they kept God’s commandments perfectly without fault. It means that they were both faithful to God from their hearts and committed their lives to God. The words that take my attention is “righteous in the sight of God”. When we read the Bible, Jesus often pointed out the religious leaders’ problems. Do you know what the two most serious problems were? Hypocrisy and legalism. Their religious practice was merely to show off before people and bound to written codes, forgetting the spirit of the law. The spirit of God’s law is “love”: love God with all your hearts and love your neighbors as yourself. Their hearts were far away from God. However, Zechariah and Elizabeth were different from that of their contemporaries. Despite all their problems, they made up their minds to live as God wanted them to and made His commandments a way of life. Not many people regarded them highly, but they were like shinning stars in the sight of God. *Philippians 2:14-16a, 14Do everything without grumbling or arguing, 15so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.”Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky 16as you hold firmly to the word of life.* Through Zechariah and Elizabeth, we can think about what kind of life God wants us to live. This society is dominated by ungodly culture and practices. Most actions are motivated by self-pleasing, selfish ambition. What is right in the sight of God is not a consideration of people anymore. Even many Christians do not have such a consideration when they make choices. However, as followers of Christ, our question should not be what is permissible, but how to please God. When we don’t have the mind of how to please God, it is easy for us to end up in self-indulgence under the name of freedom in Christ. However, freedom in Christ is not for indulging our flesh desires, but for serving God without fear in holiness and righteousness (Luke 1:74-75). When we uphold the truth of God and make God’s word as a way of life, people may not be impressed by our lifestyle, but definitely God will be pleased with us and we will shine among everyone like stars in the sky. Let’s encourage each other to live lives that please God.

1. **Your prayer has been heard (8-13)**

*Look at verses 8-9, 8Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.* According to 1 Chronicles, the King David and the priests Zadok and Ahimelech had organized the priesthood into twenty-four divisions (1 Chronicles 24:4-19). But after the Babylonian captivity, only four of the twenty-four priestly divisions returned to Judah (Ezra 2:36-38). However, the Jews wanted 24 divisions, so the remaining four divisions were divided into 24 divisions and restored the former names of each one. Each division served 2 weeks in a year, one week in the first six months and one week in the last six months. They determined what they would do by drawing lots. Zechariah’s lot was going into the inside of the temple, and burning incense in the holy place, at the altar of incense right in front of the most holy place. At that time, there were 20,000 priests in Israel and a majority of the priests would never have the chance to put their feet in the holy place, offering prayers in the presence of God. It was a big day for Zechariah, he might have felt greatly privileged to be chosen to burn incense in the presence of God. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity. How excited Zechariah would have been! I think it was God’s reward to Zechariah for living a life upholding the truth of God despite all the difficulties and challenges in his life.

*Look at verses 11-13, 11Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13But 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.”* Seeing an angel is not a common event, even in the Bible. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was greatly surprised and gripped with fear facing the holy angel in front of him. However, what the angel said is more surprising. *Look at verse 13 again, 13But 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.”* The angel said, “Your prayer has been heard.” Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying for a son for many years hoping that one day, God would give them a son, but they were old now. They might have felt that God left them in disgrace and shame for so long. They might have thought that they were forgotten by God. However, the angel said “their prayer has been heard” which means that God had been hearing their prayers continually since they started praying for a son. The Greek word for “has been heard” is *“*εισηκουσθη*” (eiseikousthei)* which means *“has been heard intently or deeply.”* God had been paying special attention to them and their prayer. We don’t know why did God not answer their prayer earlier and why God allowed them to go through such disgrace for a long time. However, one thing is clear – that God had been listening to their prayers and deeply caring for them throughout those years. God was waiting for the right time to grant their request according to His sovereign plan.

It is a great comfort and encouragement for us to know that God hears our prayers all the time. That is why Paul said in *Philippians 4:6* ***6****Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* Last week, we heard a wonderful message based on this passage by Pastor David Baik. We are going through some hardships and dealing with some urgent issues. It may be a financial hardship, difficulty finding jobs, or chronic illness, or a prayer for a spouse, or a broken relationship, or wandering children. How great it would be if God answered our prayers immediately as soon as our petitions come out of our mouth. However, God does not answer our prayer as we plan. It doesn’t mean that God does not work on our behalf. *Romans 8:28 reads,* ***28****And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* We have to know that God will always be with us and work for good. God’s presence and His goodness is always with us, but until our prayers are answered, it remains mysterious. I can stand as a witness about God’s goodness in my life. I have been through financial difficulties, health problems, career issues and more; I didn’t understand why God let me go through all those hardships, but things became clear as God answered my prayers in His time. I praise God for being with me always and working on my behalf all the time. So, let us have confidence in God’s goodness when we approach Him, because He cares for us and hears us all the time with special attention. God will answer our prayers in His proper time. (*1 John 5:14-15)*

1. **He will go on before the Lord (14-25)**

*Look at verses 14-16, 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. 16He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.* The angel told Zechariah that Elizabeth would bear a son and name him John. The name “John” means “God is gracious.” As his name, it is by God’s grace, Zechariah was able to have a son in his old age. The birth of John would be a joy and delight to him and many people. We can imagine how joyful he would be, holding a baby in his arms. However, the birth of John was more than an answer for his long personal prayer, John the Baptist would be great in the sight of God and bring a spiritual revival in the entire nation of Israel.

*Look at verse 17, 17And 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.* John the Baptist would have a very specific mission. He would be the forerunner for the coming Messiah. Then angel’s word was the direct quotation from *Malachi 4:5-7,* ***5****“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.****6****He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”* As you know, Malachi is the last prophet in the Old Testament. Since then there was no prophet until the New Testament. Some people call this period as “**400 Silent Years**” because God seemed to be silent for those years. However, God had been working toward the greatest event in the redemptive history: sending His one and only Son, Jesus Christ, as the savior of the world. The 400 years was critical to the redemptive work of God. After the closing of the Old Testament: internationally, Alexander the Great conquered the world and promoted a single language, koine Greek, which the New Testament is written in; and nationally, the Seleucid Empire, which had established idol worship in the Jerusalem temple, was overthrown through the Maccabean revolts – Israel gained independence and restored temple worship. The Jews celebrate this restoration of temple worship as the Feast of Dedication, Hanukkah. God had been working to prepare the environment for the Gospel to go out the whole world and prepare hearts of his people for the coming Messiah. Eventually, God had fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi by sending John the Baptist who would minister His people with the spirit of Elijah and bring His people back to Him. There was no silence of God. He was moving the events of the world toward fulfilling His plan of Salvation for the world.

When I look at what has happened in this country, presidents and politicians promoting ungodly policies, people adopting ungodly cultures and values as the norm, even many Christians following the trend of the world without question, sometimes I am stressed and my heart is in deep agony questioning where this world is heading. However, through this passage, it is clear that God is working even though people think it is the darkest time. God’s great plan to work for the salvation of the world keeps going without failing. We don’t understand about all the things happening in this world, but we know that God is the one who directs history and will accomplish His redemptive purpose in its midst. We should not put our hope in political parties or presidents, but put our hope in God who has been working to accomplish His redemptive work. We shouldn’t be ignorant about what is going on in this country and the world, but our focus and direction should be on how to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that many people may find life in Jesus Christ. Zechariah and Elizabeth’s child was clearly an act of God. This miraculous birth of John would prepare the miraculous birth of Jesus. Their child would bring back the people of Israel to the Lord their God. He would turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

*Look at verse 18, 18Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”* The angel delivered the good news that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son, but he wasn’t sure about it. The angel appeared before him and directly delivered the news, but he said "how can I be sure of this?” which means the angel’s presence and his word were not enough, so he asked for more signs. *Look at verses 19-20, 19The 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. 20And 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.”* His request for more signs was granted, he would not be able to speak until the appointed time. While Zechariah remained unable to speak, the angel’s words were fulfilled, Elizabeth became pregnant. The forerunner of Christ was about to come into the world. Due to his unbelief, he went through mute training, but it turned out a blessing for him. He was able to meditate deeply regarding his son and the coming of the Messiah. When we read Zechariah’s song in Luke 1:67-79, there is profound insight and revelation about the salvation that God would bring into the world. As the end of year approaches, we can have many concerns and worries that can take our attention, but may we focus on the word of God and His redemptive work through His son Jesus Christ, so that deep inspiration from God may come to all of us and we can have a very meaningful Christmas this year.