

December 11 Lesson: Zechariah Speaks

Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light
Unit 1: God's Preparation

Sunday School Lesson for the week of December 11, 2022
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Luke 1:57-66, 76-79

Key Verse: *“And you, my child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.”*

Lesson Aims

- To reflect on the “great mercy” shown by the Lord to Elizabeth and the joy it created
- To recall how Zechariah came to be mute and how he miraculously came to speak again
- To explore the question, *“What then will this child become?”*
- To study the canticle of Zechariah and the other canticles of Luke 1-2
- To draw out the significance of what Zechariah revealed about the Messiah and his forerunner
- To reflect on John's role as a prophet in comparison to the prophets who preceded him
- To explore how John will be a prophet to wake people up and to give them hope

The Great Mercy Shown to Elizabeth

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

We learned in the previous lesson about the back story behind Elizabeth and her pregnancy. The news that Elizabeth was to conceive and bear a child was announced to her husband Zechariah by none other than the angel Gabriel. It was a surprising announcement because Elizabeth had been unable to have children and was considered to be well past childbearing age. Word had gotten around that Elizabeth was pregnant, and the neighbors and relatives rejoiced with her when she gave birth to a son. They rejoiced not only because Elizabeth and Zechariah would enjoy the unexpected blessing of a child, but also because there was no doubt in their minds that a miracle had been performed. The Lord had done this. The Lord had shown great mercy to Elizabeth.

Those who desire to have children and are unable to conceive can identify with the deep longing and anguish that accompany that experience. Those who are finally blessed with children through natural means, through medical intervention, or through fostering or adoption often attest to the great mercy shown to them. In biblical times, the inability to conceive and bear children carried with it a stigma. One need only to read about Hannah in the first two chapters of 1 Samuel. In that story, Hannah's heartache of being unable to have children was compounded

by the torment she had to endure from her husband's other wife. Hannah "was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly." (1 Samuel 1:10) Imagine the great weight that was lifted from her when Hannah was able to conceive and bear her son, Samuel. Hannah would have identified with the feelings associated with being shown divine mercy.

The word "mercy" also conveys the idea of favor. When God grants God's favor, there is often a bigger picture that accompanies the divine action. In the case of Hannah, God had big plans for her son Samuel. Samuel would be thought of as the last judge to rule before God allowed and anointed kings to lead God's people. Then, Samuel would become a prophet and the chief advisor to Israel's first two kings, including King David. In the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a thousand years later, Gabriel's announcement informed these parents that their son was to fulfill a grand purpose in God's plan.

The parallels between Hannah and the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah do not end here. When Hannah was praying in the temple for a child, she made a vow to the Lord that if she was given a son she would dedicate him to the Lord. She would raise him to live out the nazirite vows listed in the sixth chapter of the Book of Numbers. These vows included abstinence from drinking wine or other intoxicants. Notice the parallel with what the angel Gabriel told Zechariah. Gabriel said that the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth must never drink wine or strong drink—"even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit." (Luke 1:15) God had big plans for their son that required a life of self-denial and spiritual preparation.

What thoughts have you had about the great mercy shown to you in the birth of your children or your nieces and nephews? If it had been difficult for you, your wife, or your sister to become pregnant, how did the eventual birth or adoption heighten the sense of excitement? What dreams have you had about the future of a child laid out before him or her? How could we think of raising children in ways that prepare them spiritually for life ahead? Could God have plans for each of us that take us outside of ourselves so that our lives could be spent in a way that adds value to the lives of others?

How Zechariah Came to Speak Again

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." ⁶¹ They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." ⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.

In the previous week's lesson, we were told that Zechariah and Elizabeth "were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord." (Luke 1:6) The Lord knew that he was placing this child of great promise into the hands of devout parents. As devout parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth would be very familiar with the holy ritual of having their son brought for circumcision according to the law of Moses. This rite signified their son's membership among the covenant people of God. It was a high holy moment for all who were gathered for this joyous occasion.

A part of the ritual was the naming of the child. In biblical times, a lot of care went into the naming of a child. Those who were gathered with Zechariah and Elizabeth assumed they would be naming their child after his father. When Elizabeth said “no,” that he was to be called “John,” they wondered why they would use a name that none of their relatives had. They wanted to verify that Zechariah was supportive of this idea of naming his son John. They motioned to him, because he had been unable to speak for at least nine months.

Again, the previous week’s lesson reveals why Zechariah had been unable to speak. When Gabriel first announced to Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would have a child, Zechariah’s first instinct was to ask for some kind of confirmation. After all, he had to go to his wife and tell her what Gabriel had said. Since Elizabeth had been unable to conceive and was on up in years, Zechariah would have wondered how to tell her that something no less than miraculous was about to happen. Gabriel told Zechariah, “because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” (Luke 1:20)

Gabriel had made this startling announcement to Zechariah while he was in the temple fulfilling his week-long role as priest. When Zechariah went out from the sanctuary into the outer courts where the people were, they wondered what had taken so long. Immediately, they concluded that he had seen a vision. It must have shown on his face, and then it would have been confirmed by the fact that he could not speak. You could say that Zechariah got the confirmation he had requested. He wanted to know how an old man and woman were going to have a child after all the years of not being able to do so. If an angel could render Zechariah mute, then perhaps God could provide the way for Zechariah and Elizabeth to conceive.

It was actually a two-part verification that Gabriel offered. The first part was Zechariah being made mute, and the second part was when God would finally enable him to speak again—the day when these things occurred. He was not able to speak eight days earlier when John was born. He was able to speak again during the ceremony when the name of their child was made public. The decision to name their child was not Elizabeth’s choice or Zechariah’s choice. Gabriel was the one who told Zechariah that God had already named their child “John.” Elizabeth had been told (in writing) by her husband what the angel had told him. It was when the crowd motioned to Zechariah, and he wrote on a tablet that their son’s name was to be John, that Zechariah was able to speak. Zechariah’s obedience to Gabriel’s command “broke the spell” you might say.

When Zechariah’s mouth was opened and tongue freed, the first thing out of his mouth was praise directed to God. Think of all that pent-up praise, joy, and amazement! Can you imagine a more beautiful and memorable circumcision ceremony?

When I think of this ceremony, I cannot help but think of the practice of infant baptism and the doctrine of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace is the grace that “comes before.” The idea is that we walk into a future kept by God for us. Even before we are even aware of God, God is aware of us. John would not have been aware of what was being done for him when he was eight days old. This does not mean, however, that John’s circumcision ceremony was inconsequential. I imagine God using this moment to shape the people in John’s orbit. I imagine it shaping the conversations that would happen around John. I imagine this moment shaping the priorities to

which John would be exposed all during his upbringing. When John was named at this public ceremony, it spoke volumes concerning his identity, his sense of belonging, and his destiny.

Think of the religious rites where you and your children might have been participants, including but not limited to baptism, confirmation, marriage, church healing services, even funerals. Think of Holy Communion where Christ is spiritually present in and around the bread and cup and spoken of in the liturgy. Think of the prayers in this service and the liturgy that recalls our salvation history. Think of the confession of our sin that is a part of the service and the pronouncement that our sins are forgiven, so that we are freed to new life. What can you do to become more aware of these moments as means of God's grace—making the grace of God more real for us? How do these moments make us more aware of the miraculous?

What Then Will this Child Become?

⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For indeed the hand of the Lord was with him.

Note that the fear that came over all their neighbors was not the fear that we associate with a sense of foreboding. The fear noted in this scripture is marked by a sense of reverence, awe, and recognition of divine forces not under our control. I like to visualize the conversations reverberating around the Judean hill country. They did not even personally witness Zechariah's encounter with the angel Gabriel. This is the nature of such encounters. There is the event, and then the subsequent telling of it. We might dwell on what is lost in translation between the event and its telling, but that would be to dwell on the wrong thing. There is a build-up as the ripples of an event go outward. God has evidently designed it to be this way. There is the eyewitness of the event, and then there are the participants who join in by faith.

There is the telling of an event, and then follows the pondering and reflection. Relating the details of an event and making meaning of the event are two distinct but interrelated movements. The overwhelming outcome of the reflection surrounding the birth of John to Zechariah and Elizabeth was to wonder what this child was to become. It was an unmistakable conclusion for them that the hand of the Lord was upon this child. This was a child with a destiny. The burning question had to do with what John's destiny was.

We wait on tiptoe for what answer is going to come. According to Luke, “His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied.” (Luke 1:67) This is clearly an instance where Zechariah was not merely going to give his opinion. What will follow could be classified as a divine utterance. Zechariah, in the power of the Holy Spirit, will speak for God.

The speech is in the form of a song resembling the kind of Hebrew poetry we find in Job, the Psalms, the Old Testament prophets, and sprinkled throughout scripture (for instance, the Song of Moses in Exodus 15). In the first two chapters of Luke's gospel, there are four such songs, or canticles. These songs were identified by the Early Church and have been used in Christian

worship from the beginning until the present day. These four canticles have been given names by the Church.

- The *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) sung by Mary
- The *Benedictus* (Luke 1:67-79) sung by Zechariah
- The *Gloria in Excelsis* (Luke 2:14) sung to the shepherds on the night Jesus was born
- The *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29-32) sung by Simeon, an old man who could depart in peace because he witnessed the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah

These songs punctuate the nativity story in Luke in ways that elevate the story while adding movement and emotion. The content of these songs also bridges the Old and New Testaments in ways that celebrate the arc of salvation history as it finds fulfillment in the incarnation (the Word made flesh). We will give attention to Mary's song in the lesson two weeks from now.

What do you make of the buzz created throughout the Judean hill country about the birth of John? Have you ever been a part of spreading news of God's work in your own life or in the life of someone in your social network? Think of the ways we can give witness to our faith even with a question about what God may be up to. If you have a talent for putting your experiences in words on paper, how might you put that talent to work to share how God shows up in your everyday life? You might have an undiscovered talent for creative writing. You would not be the first to discover that talent simply by journaling about what God is doing in your life. Many a poet or song writer was born in this way.

What Did Zechariah's Canticle Say?

Strangely enough, Zechariah's canticle does not begin by addressing his son's identity. Instead, Zechariah celebrates the coming of the promised Son of David.

"Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,

For he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty savior for us

in the house of his servant David,

as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

and has remembered his holy covenant,

the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,

to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness

before him all our days." (Luke 1:68-75)

Note the tense of this song. The song describes a mighty savior who has been raised up as if the redemption of God's people *has already happened*. Perhaps it is because of Zechariah's knowledge of what was already being set in motion. Not only that, but what was happening was promised to the house of David centuries earlier, it was spoken of by prophets of old, and it was promised to the ancient fathers and mothers of the faith going as far back as Abraham and Sarah according to God's holy covenant. Also, what was happening came forth from the heart of a God

who is just, merciful, and compassionate and desires to save the oppressed from the hands of their enemies. The end goal is to create a people who serve God confidently and without fear, in holiness and righteousness, before God.

Zechariah sees in his present-day the vision of what God will accomplish. Visionary people are always keeping the end in mind to give them hope and to direct and drive their present actions. When we endeavor to live in the present according to God's future promise, then the future has already come in a real way. Zechariah's song anticipates the reign of the Christ.

Up until this point, Zechariah has focused on the coming of the Son of David and not his son, but then the focus of Zechariah's song shifts to his son John.

**⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸ Because of the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹ to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."**

Notice the order of the song: the Messiah first, then the Messiah's forerunner. The Messiah occupies first place, and the forerunner takes second place *on purpose*, because the forerunner's purpose is to serve the Messiah. Zechariah appears to understand this completely.

Zechariah knows that his son will be called the prophet of the Most High. John's calling will be that of a prophet. Think of the prophets who preceded John, who told of a coming Messiah, the promised Son of David. God had promised David that God would make a dynasty of him and his descendants. There would never lack a son of David on the throne of God's people. Although there were conditions on such a promise, the prophets were sent by God to keep this hope alive among the people of God, especially during all the dark years of Babylonian oppression and all the uncertain years that followed. During Zechariah's day, God's people were still hanging onto this hope as they suffered under the oppression of Roman rule. John would be the last of a long line of prophets preceding the coming of the Messiah. John would be the last of the prophets before Jesus, but certainly not the least among them.

John would be the forerunner who will go before the promised Messiah to prepare the way. How will John do this? Zechariah's prophetic canticle gives us clues. He will give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins. He will give witness to the tender mercy of God. He will point to the dawn that is coming for those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. His ministry will guide the feet of God's people into the way of peace.

Following the pattern of the prophets before him, John will fulfill a two-pronged ministry of waking people up from their complacency and giving them hope—in other words, “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.” To give people knowledge of their salvation involves waking people up to the ways they sin, the need to acknowledge their sin, to repent, and to seek

God's forgiveness and reconciliation with God. This is why those who are too comfortable need to be "afflicted" by helping them come under conviction. Forgiveness then brings all the comfort we could ask for. This is the salvation that brings us out of darkness and the shadow of death and into the light of God's love and renewed life. This is the way out of our inner turmoil and into the way of peace.

Now that we live two thousand years *after* the coming of the Messiah, how do you recognize this truth and give witness to it in the way you live? As we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," how do you seek to anticipate in your daily living on earth the divine life kept in heaven for you? How are you using these days in the season of Advent to prepare for the celebration of the birth of Christ? How might we take a page from Zechariah's song and grow in the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sins? In what ways are we continuing our journey from darkness and the shadow of death into the way of peace?

Prayer

Gracious Father, who sent prophets to prepare the way for your son, make us sensitive to the opportunities of this holy season of preparation, that we may grow in our faith and glorify you and your son, through the power and leading of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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