

Service Opening:

We hear the Christmas angels The great glad tidings tell;

Oh, come to us, Abide with us, Our Lord Immanuel. ("O Little Town of Bethlehem", CW 65/66 vs.4)

How many others can you think of... how many mentions of angels occur in the songs that we love to hear/sing at this time of year?

Hark, the Herald Angels sing, Glory to the Newborn King (CW 61).

Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o'er the plains... come to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing. (CW 63)

Go tell it on the Mountain... While shepherds kept their watching O'er silent flocks by night, Behold, throughout the heavens there shone a holy light... lo above the earth Rang out the angel chorus That hailed our Savior's birth (CW57)

At this time of year at the mention of angels you might immediately envision the ones who flooded the sky with glorious light and good news of great joy on a hillside outside Bethlehem. But did you know – do you recall – it was *over a year prior to that* when the unexpected appearances of angel messengers broke a 400 year silence. That's how long it had been since God's last recorded word had come.

God's angels were not only dispatched on Christmas night. How many angel appearances on the New Testament timeline happen in the days prior to Jesus' birth in Bethlehem? Over these next 3 Sundays we'll set our sights on learning from...

the angel messengers on the Savior's birth.

Intro to Gospel lesson & Sermon Bible Reading -

Unexpected! How else would any human feel when heaven-sent messengers suddenly burst upon the scene? That certainly captures one aspect of the angel appearances in the days prior to Jesus' birth.

But *the news* they brought was actually *Long-expected*. They had news from heaven above. It is news that impacts all who dwell upon the earth. They announced the arrival of the Long-awaited One: the Savior's birth.

That is at the core and center of the first angel appearance on the New Testament timeline. Interestingly, interwoven is also an announcement of another birth. And this birth would be so very special to two individuals in particular. We have before us a very personal episode in the life of one man, Zechariah, and his wife Elisabeth.

We might at first think: well, what do I have in common with Zechariah, and this scene that unfolds in Luke ch.1? I certainly see the importance of learning John the Baptizer's role in being a messenger to point to Jesus. But is learning about Zechariah and what happened to him going to be of benefit for us? He lived so long ago. The temple worship of the Old Testament time, which we see Zechariah engaged in, had so many different requirements, which were specific to those years leading up to Jesus' life's work for us. Now our worship - while strikingly similar in some ways: *who we worship* and *why we worship* and *where we find God's timeless truth* (in the Word/the Scriptures) remain the same as ever – our worship has different elements now which focus our attention on the Savior's finished work.

And yet, Zechariah is someone with whom we can relate. I'm talking about relating with his strength and his weakness; with his trust and his doubt. The child of God, Zechariah, and this event from his life is something from which we can learn a tremendous amount for our walk of faith.

- **Watch Luke 1:5-25**

Sermon message

You've undoubtedly seen or heard examples where unexpected gifts – the kind that are huge and otherwise unheard of – have been given to individuals. The person who was walking 2 hours to work, and taking care of their family on top it, is given the news: his co-workers all chipped in and bought him a car. An undercover boss steps into the world of some of his employees. He finds out one young employee has had a pretty rough go of it in life, and is working hard to get things on track, going to college even while working. But he's struggling to pay the bill. After the boss' identity is revealed, the boss unloads the news: a fund will be set up, to cover the full college tuition for the employee. Have you ever seen a scene like

that? If you have, what sticks in your mind? For me, it is the sight of someone completely overcome by emotion. "I never expected such an expensive/huge gift." "It's beyond my wildest imagination of what someone would do for me."

And one response that sometimes creeps in, and I think we can get why, is: "It just can't be true!" "There must be some mistake." "There is no way this is possible." And even, "I dare not – I just can't – believe this and get my hopes lifted, only to have them crushed later."

Now, what if – in this scenario – the stakes are raised to the highest level? What I mean is: what if the "seems-too-good and too-much-to-be-true" news is delivered by *God*? Think of the implications if we respond to such a message of good news with the reaction: "It can't be true. I don't know if I can believe it."

Just take a moment, and run through the fallout if that is the mistaken notion that tangles up our heart. What are we really expressing with such doubt? "God, do you really mean what you say... can I really depend on your Word? God, do you really hear me, care about me, and answer my prayers... can I really depend on your love?"

A lie the devil has used as bait for so many years and in so many ways is: "God doesn't care. He doesn't care about this dark world. Just look at what's happening in it! And He doesn't care about you. Sure He made that promise about caring way back when. But you've been such a bother, He long ago must have given up on helping you."

Do you think the devil attempted that very line of thought back in Zechariah's day? Recall, the last time God had spoken was 400 years prior. Before that He had spoken through prophets, and through angel messengers too. But that was a long time ago. Had God stopped speaking? Had He stopped listening to His people?

Even if there were those who didn't doubt that God was still listening (and there were such individuals), you can imagine there might have been some voices still whispering, "He certainly doesn't seem, however, to be listening to Zechariah and Elizabeth."

For years they had waited. Others from their extended family celebrated births. And Elizabeth's arms remained empty. They watched as Zechariah's fellow priests had families. And they ached for a child of their own. And they undoubtedly prayed. But still no child of their own came.

Zechariah and Elizabeth, for their part, were still offering their prayers to God, and listening to His Word, for that fits with the description "blameless." That is not saying they were perfect. They were calling on God to forgive them, and trusting in the Lord to do that very thing and make them right and at peace with Him. But as far as prayers for a child it might have seemed pointless to ask at this point – Elizabeth barren and both beyond the usual age for conceiving a child.

Then a different, very special day came up in the life of Zechariah. The priests, as they took turns serving at the temple, cast lots – basically drew straws – to see who would have the duty to go into the temple, and to burn the incense that symbolized the people's prayers ascending to God. It was once in a lifetime that a priest would get the chance to do this. And it turns out that Zechariah waited a long time for his turn. Now, well along in years, Zechariah was chosen.

You saw the depiction of this. When Zechariah entered the temple, he walked past the special candlestick with seven wicks burning upon it, sending flickering light across the room. The incense he brought in for the altar would have given a glorious scent to fill the space. And then someone suddenly stood next to the altar. A man? No. Can't be another human. The only way a person could be in here is if they had come from the Most Holy Place or right from heaven itself. This must be an angel, sent from God himself.

And the angel said: "Do not be afraid! Your prayer has been heard."

"You will have a son!"

"He will be a joy and a delight!"

"Many will rejoice because of his birth!"

"He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth."

He's special. A Nazarite from birth, that special vow given by one dedicated to God for a period of time. But usually it was a limited time. This would be, according to God's wishes, for the boy's lifetime. Only two others had such lifelong Nazarite roles: Samson and Samuel, Old Testament judges/leaders and in the case of Samuel, a prophet too.

"Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah..."

A prophet. He will point people to God. That's why many will rejoice.

"to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

To make people ready. He's going to prepare the way for the promised One, for the one who will bring salvation.

Wow!

Have you ever been in a situation like that? I mean: Where what was promised at least seemed like too much. You know, where you think that the person making the promise has gone too far.

But this – here in Luke ch.1 – is different. This is clearly a messenger from heaven with news straight from God. To which... Zechariah shakes his head. "How am I supposed to know this?" Was he thinking it was just too much? That he and his wife were too old? That it didn't make any sense. "Now?" That this word – this promise – from God was impossible?

But think that through. If that were so, if this giving of a son to Elizabeth and Zechariah were too much, too hard, then what would that mean about the promise given so many years prior, the promise last spoken about from the lips of the Lord hundreds of years before this day of the angel's appearance, the promise waiting for the fullness of the time to arrive for God to come and save His people? Was that promise too much for the Lord to accomplish? Too hard? What then?

Zechariah had questioned more than an angel's word about something promised for his and his wife's life. Zechariah had questioned the Lord's word. And there's a lot riding on being able to count on the Word of the Lord. If you want to get the feel for how important this whole issue is, look at Gabriel's reply.

"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. ²⁰ 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 proper time."

Zechariah was not just asking a question of how this will be accomplished. Zechariah was questioning, doubting God's truthfulness.

God still had plans, and He still would keep His promise – for sending a child to Zechariah & Elizabeth and for sending a Savior for us all. He had just been waiting for the right time.

Zechariah finished his week of service. And when it was done... a silent Zechariah walked home. And soon, Elizabeth became pregnant.

God had always been listening to their prayers. And He acted now in spite of Zechariah's weakness of faith. You see, God's faithfulness is not dependent upon us. It was not affected by Zechariah's doubts. That's how the Lord, as well as His Word, are. Dependable. His promises aren't conditioned upon our response. The Lord acts in undeserved love and faithfulness.

Wow! Just what we – like Zechariah – need.

When you look in the mirror, when you take off the mask, when you look at everything you've ever done or thought... you'd never expect love. Not for who you really are. You know your doubts. You know the ways you've questioned God. There's no reason for God to listen to you. And yet... and yet God listens. He is faithful to all His promises. Not if you pray extra hard. Not if you earn it by doing something really good. He listens just because of who He is, just because He keeps His Word, just because of His great love for you.

That's what we see with Zechariah. God gave out of His love and faithfulness: A child. But not just any child. A child that would get the people ready to meet with God himself.

And then God himself came.

Love, this love, God in the flesh come to seek and to save lost sinners, is startling. Amazing. So much so, it is beyond human ability to fathom or understand. So the Lord comes to reveal it and create trust in it and correct us when we begin to doubt it. All through His powerful Word. It is life-creating. It is life-sustaining.

Here is the answer, dear Christian, dear child of God to the devil's lie, "God doesn't care. He must have stopped answering your prayers long ago. God's promises can't be intended for you. It's all too good to be true for someone like you." No! See here (in the Word, the Bible). God loves you, even when you are weak in faith. He hears you.

And even more: Forgives you. For here is love that doesn't flinch at our darkness but reaches out and says, "I will take this darkness on myself." See God in the flesh who chose to come for you. He says, "You are mine. You are the one I choose to redeem with my holy life and innocent suffering and death."

Yes. God listens. God cares. God's every Word is true. Amen.