



Luke 1:5-25

5 In 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.

6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,

9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

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.

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.

16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

17 And 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.”

On this first Sunday of Advent we gather to worship our God in anticipation of the celebration of the birth of our Lord. What a great time to study “The Angels of Christmas!” Angels have been around since the very beginning. The very first mention of angels is found in Genesis 3:24 **“So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.”**

All throughout the Old Testament we see people encountering and interacting with angels. We see angels with Lot at Sodom and Gomorrah. Joshua argued with an angel. Jacob wrestles with an angel. Zechariah had an extensive conversation with an angel. When Moses received the ten commandments, God gave him a guardian angel to lead him and when Moses later passed away, Deuteronomy tells us that Satan and the angel Michael disputed over the body of Moses. It was an angel that stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. Isaiah, Elijah and Ezekiel all spoke with angels.

And in the New Testament we have over a dozen references to angels appearing to people to aid or give them instruction. From Matthew to Revelation, angels are a constant presence as God uses them to speak into men and women. We see them present throughout the life of Jesus, from His birth to His resurrection. Angels are God’s messengers, observers, clarifiers and sometimes correction officers. They provide God with a foothold in our lives.

The big question is, do we believe in angels, that they really exist and that they can truly speak into our lives? Or do we just pay lip service to their existence because we read about them in the Bible? Have you ever seen an angel? Would you know an angel was an angel if you saw one?

In many cases where an angel appears to people in the Bible, the first words out of their mouths is “Fear Not! Do not be afraid!” Yet when we see illustrations of angels, they seldom seem to be something to be afraid of. If an angel does appear to us, is that angel someone that we should automatically fear?

When we look at our scripture today where the angel appears to Zechariah, we read that Zechariah is gripped with fear and that the first words the angel speaks are “Do not be afraid.” We do need to understand that Zechariah was alone and no one else was supposed to be there. So, it would have been somewhat startling to suddenly have someone in the temple with him. But being startled is not necessarily being afraid. Why is there an assumption that the angel is something to be feared? After all, Gabriel is there to bring Zechariah good news. Even though he and his wife are old and childless, God is going to intervene and give them a child. This is GREAT news! And even better, the child is to have a purpose; a special relationship with God. The child has been chosen to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. The Israelites have been waiting for over 500 years for the arrival of the Messiah. This is exciting news!

But let's take a minute and put ourselves into Zechariah's sandals. A strange man appears in a place where no one else should be. In all fairness, the Bible does not say that Gabriel was glowing or that he was floating in the air. It does not say that he has wings, stands ten feet tall or wields a mighty sword. But it does tell us that Zechariah knew that Gabriel was an angel. He had no doubt that Gabriel is an angel. But then Gabriel tells this old priest that his elderly wife is now going to have a child and that child is the one that will pave the way for the coming of the Messiah. No matter how strong your faith is, if this were to happen to us, it most assuredly would be disconcerting. Can we not agree that this would challenge anyone's faith?

To add to the story, we find that although Zechariah has no problem believing that he was being visited by an angel, he was a bit lacking in faith when it comes to the message that the angel is delivering. And because he doesn't readily accept what Gabriel is telling him, Gabriel makes it so that Zechariah can't speak, and he remains mute until the birth of his son, John.

Imagine this scene from the people's viewpoint. Zechariah goes into the temple to do his duty and is gone for a much longer time than normal. When he does come back out, this is what the gospel of Luke tells us in chapter 1:22: **"When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the**

temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.” Imagine him trying to convey this message to the people:

- 1. He had been visited by an angel**
- 2. He and his wife were going to have a baby, something they had been praying for a very long time and had given up on.**
- 3. That the baby was chosen by God for a significant purpose**
- 4. And this is the big one, that the Messiah was coming and that his baby, John, was to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. To make straight the path!**

And doing all this communicating by waving his hands around. How frustrating this must have been. How exciting this must have been.

And even after all this happened, this dutiful servant of God doesn't rush home but stays at the temple to complete his days of ministrations as intercessory for the people before he returned home to his wife. I truly believe that when his wife Elizabeth conceived, it may have been a total shock to her, but Zechariah had seen enough that he no longer doubted the power of God working in his life.

But that is so true of all of us. We often can't or won't see the miracle until we are on the other side of the. It is much easier to look back and see where God has touched our soul and moved in our life than it is to see the miracle coming or even when we are in the middle of it. Which is why I ask again, if an angel

appears in our lives, will we recognize the angel as an angel? Do we want angels in our lives? Do we see angels as God speaking into us or, do we see them as mystic meddlers? Zechariah could have settled into his disbelief. He could have just pretended that he hadn't seen anything and made up some excuse for why it took so long for him to complete his duties in the temple. But instead, he made it a point to do everything he could to communicate to those waiting outside the temple, the great news that he had been given and by whom.

It also had to be difficult to understand that everything that was happening was in preparation for something else. How wonderfully miraculous that Zechariah had seen an angel. How confusing that he was suddenly mute. How exciting that he and his wife Elizabeth were going to have a child. How extremely awesome that child was going to grow to be a messenger for God! And this isn't even the main event. All of this was done to prepare for the main event, the birth of Jesus Christ.

How many of you know what a warmup band is? I've known a few warmup bands in my life. A warmup band is generally a band that hasn't quite reached the level of performance that you find in the main band at a concert. They play in preparation for the band that everyone has come to see. Some of these bands go on to acclaim of their own. Some just fade away. The point is that no one goes to a concert just to hear the warmup band. The purpose of the warmup

band is to build up the anticipation and excitement for the main event. It doesn't mean that the warmup band isn't good. Often, they are great. But for the audience, it's like a free mini concert performed by people they have never heard of. Still, the warmup band prepares the audience for the band to come and it is an extremely important that they perform at their highest level so that when the main band comes on stage there is already electricity in the air. And it is through their performance that:

- 1. They generate excitement for the coming event to help make the concert a memorable event for the audience and**
- 2. They also gain notoriety for themselves**

This is exactly what John did. He was the warmup band for the Messiah. And even after John baptized Jesus, he continued to preach and point the way to Christ's ministry. John preached the message of Jesus until his death at the hands of Salome' and Herod. I want to make a special note here that John knew that he would never be the main event. He was not there to become the main event. His role was as a supporting player in the grand scheme of things and no matter how big of a following he attracted, he was never going to have more than a support role. This did not bother him. He was never in competition with Jesus and this often perturbed his followers. He knew his place in history and was pleased to stand in the service of his God pointing the people around him to Jesus whose sandals he was not fit to tie.

So, when Gabriel appeared to Zechariah in the temple, it was the start of a series of chain-reaction events leading not just to the nativity but also well into the ministry of Jesus here on earth. This was a fulfillment of prophecy. It is in Mark 1:2-3

As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

This is a reference to Isaiah 40:30. God speaks into His People through Isaiah and then fulfills that prophecy in John. When Zechariah went into that temple that day to do his duty, he had no idea that God was going to send an angel to let him know that he was about to be used in a mighty way. Why do you think that God went to all the trouble to send Gabriel to deliver the message to Zechariah? Well, the truth is that God was going to need for Zechariah to speak into the life of John as he grew into his role, to ensure that John became the messenger that God intended.

We all need people like that in our lives. Sometimes it's can be our parents, but it can also be friends and mentors. We need for people to speak into our lives to help keep us on track. God uses these people to guide us into a closer relationship with Him and away from temptations that might drive us further from Him.

We need to do this. It doesn't happen as much in today's world, but we need to speak into the lives of our children to set them on a straight path with God, to

encourage a constant relationship with God and to grow our children in the spirit of God so that they know and converse with their creator. So that they understand the sacrifice that Christ made to ensure that relationship. To understand the meaning of salvation so that they don't cast off that relationship when it becomes inconvenient. John the Baptist did not lead a convenient life but his faith never wavered.

I believe that there are two types of angels. I believe in the reality of God's heavenly angels, whether we ever encounter them or not. Their purpose always seems to be to intervene at some important crossroad of God's interaction with mankind, just as Gabriel is acting as God's herald when he bring the news that God is going to bring a child into Zechariah and Elizabeth's life, a child that, in turn, with prepare the way for the coming Messiah.

The second type of angel doesn't have this kind of nature, but they are just as important. These angels are people that God uses to speak into our lives on a daily basis. Those people that provide us with guidance, those people who answer our phone calls in the middle of the night when we find ourselves alone and frightened. Those people who visit us in prison, clothe us when we are naked, put food on our table when we are unable to. Those people who watch our children when we have important errand to run; who visit us in the hospital; who call just to check on us once in a while, who drop us a card in the mail just to let us know they are thinking about us. Those people who keep the example of Christ fresh in our minds just because they are striving to be the hands and feet of Jesus in this world.

No matter what type of angel God sends into our lives, we need to prepare ourselves to receive their message, gift or visit with grace and thanksgiving. God sends angels for a reason. It is just one way that he shows us that He loves us.

But that coin has two sides. Do you allow God to use you to be an angel in someone else's life? Do you listen to that still, small voice where God tells you to visit someone in prison or someone who is sick? Maybe buy someone a meal or give them your coat or sweater because you know that they need it more than you do? This is a great time of year to call that special friend that you haven't talked to in a very long time, just to catch up. Take the opportunities that come your way this season to reach out to others. Even just a smile can go a long way at this time of year. There is something about the holiday season that reminds us of how blessed we are and much pain there is around us. We can be the angels that make the difference in someone else's life.

I want to thank you for being angels in my life. You will never know how much it is appreciated. Next week we are going to talk about "The Angel of Fulfillment". I truly hope you will be here to hear the story of how God sends that same scary Angel, Gabriel, to bring a message of fulfillment to a young girl who overcomes her fear and embraces her role as the vessel of God as He reaches into mankind to build a bridge of love and salvation.

AMEN