

WILL YOU TAKE YOUR CHANCES?

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ November 29, 2015

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 upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years. 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 give him the name 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 from birth. ¹⁶ 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, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." ¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." ¹⁹ The angel answered, "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."

Let us prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of our Savior,

Did you ever stop to think how different things would have turned out if Noah had not listened to God? Maybe Noah could have said, "No! I'm not going to build an ark," "It's not worth it." And so, instead of building an ark for 120 years, he could have taken life easy, he could have ignored the gross immorality going on around him, but then what? Would God have sent a flood and wiped out all of mankind, Noah included, or would he have gotten someone else to build the boat? Those are kind of questions I'm glad we don't have to answer because Noah did listen, Noah did taken advantage of the opportunity with which God presented him.

As we prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ – first as a baby in a manger, second as a returning king – we are going to take a look at some of the events leading up to the first Christmas, to see how God prepared his people for the coming Messiah. He did not surprise them by coming completely unexpectedly. This morning, our attention is drawn to the opening verses of the gospel of Luke, to the time God prepared the parents of the preparer for the Savior. And just as Zechariah was given a chance to be a part of salvation's story, we too are given a chance to be part of that story. The question is, WILL YOU TAKE YOUR CHANCES?

It was the time for the morning sacrifice. As the massive temple gates slowly swung on their hinges, a three-fold blast from the silver trumpets seemed to waken the city of Jerusalem. Within the courts of the temple all had been busy, preparing for the daily rituals that lay ahead. The supervising priest had informed all of their duties, some of the great tasks had been chosen by lot to prevent disputes of greatness. The altar of burnt offering in front of the temple had been stoked in preparation for the sacrifices, the seven-branched menorah candle had been trimmed within the temple itself. Preparations had been made within the temple for the most solemn part of the day's service was – the offering of incense, which symbolized Israel's accepted prayers.

It was considered a great privilege and honor to be chosen to offer incense in the temple, an honor that a priest might get only once in a lifetime. On this particular morn, the lot had fallen to an aged priest by the name of Zechariah. The age of his years may have even surpassed 60. And so at the proper time, Zechariah took the golden censor into the temple, and stood before the holy place alone, lit only by the glow of the seven-branched candlestick. To his right was the table of show-bread, on his left the candlestick. And straight before him, before the heavy curtain which separated the holy of holies was the altar of incense. He drew close to the altar and spread the incense evenly upon it, offered his prayer and was about to retire.

Until something caught his eye. He was not alone in the holy place, there was someone else there. This alone would have been enough to startle any man, let alone an aged priest. But it was not just a man. On the right side there appeared a glorious angel, a messenger of God. This was something completely unexpected to Zechariah. He would have turned and ran if his feet had not been as if nailed to the floor. The angel spoke and said, **"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard."**

The angel proceeded to tell him of the wonderful news that his elderly wife would have a child. This child would be a blessing, not just for Zechariah and Elizabeth, but for the whole world. He would make a people prepared for the Lord – the coming of the Messiah. He would come with the spirit and power of Elijah. Elijah was one of the great prophets of the Old Testament, the George Washington or Abraham Lincoln of prophets. The name of this child would be John – which means "God is gracious." We will hear a little more about this child next week.

Think about what that would have been like for Zechariah. He had prayed many years for a child, but to have it come about in this way, in a way similar to the great patriarch Abraham, was unthinkable. No doubt this day would have been special for him. The burning of incense alone would have made this day worth writing home about, but couple that with a visit from an angel was even more incredible, and most incredible this angel revealed that the coming of the Messiah was close at hand. I bet that would have given Zechariah an extra bounce in his step in the days to come as he saw how God was using him in his plan, no matter what seemingly mundane task lay before him.

How does that relate to us? I think it is only natural at this time of the year to get into a little bit of a rut. It's only natural this time of year to take a number of things for granted. We've just turned the corner on Thanksgiving, when we've taken a specific day to thank God for our blessings, and now we

return to daily life. Our attention has already turned to Christmas. Christmas is coming, we expect it to happen. But is that always a good thing? What I mean is WILL YOU TAKE YOUR CHANCE with Christmas?

How often do we take for granted not only things in our life, but how often do we take for granted our very faith, our very being a Christian? As if being a Christian is just some “ho-hum” thing in our life. Have we forgotten what being a Christian means? Being a Christian means we have been plucked from eternal death and placed into the loving hands of our heavenly Father. Being a Christian means instead of suffering an eternity in hell, we enjoy the glories of heaven. Any small “nuisances” of being a Christian now are not worth comparing to what we have as Christians.

How dare we take our Christianity for granted. It would be like foregoing a spot in a luxury box to sit in the bleachers. It would have been like Zechariah at the temple saying, “Na, I don’t want to offer incense in the temple.” You might compare being a Christian to us being chosen by lot to go and offer incense in the temple, TAKE YOUR CHANCE, and make the most of that chance, it is a wonderful and privileged responsibility.

Because just like in the case of Zechariah, God orchestrated everything. God is the one who chose Zechariah by lot to offer incense in the temple that day. God is the one who allowed his elderly wife Elizabeth to have a child. God is the one who chose that child and filled him with the Holy Spirit to be the one who would prepare the way for the Savior – the Savior who was long promised and whose coming we remember now. God orchestrated all of this for you and for me, choosing us to be a part of his family.

He has already made us a part of his family by grace when the Holy Spirit entered your heart, cleansing you of every sin, this is what God has given you, this is you being given that wonderful chance. Now what will you do with that chance?

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In the second half of the account of Zechariah and Gabriel, we see both God’s discipline and his patience, and we can learn from both. Once the angel Gabriel gave the good news to Zechariah, he didn’t believe it. But it wasn’t just an “I don’t believe this wonderful news is happening to me” it was an “I don’t think this is possible to happen to me” thought. In his unbelief of the news, he asked for a sign, for proof of God’s favor.

Now it’s true, when you page through the Bible sometimes it can appear that God is more lenient with some people than he is with others. But when we remember our God, we remember he is perfect, we remember that he can read hearts, we remember that he always acts in a perfect and loving way. The way God acted with Zechariah was perfect. The sign he gave Zechariah was to strike him dumb for several months while the child grew in his wife’s belly. This was God’s discipline upon Zechariah.

And yet we also see God’s patience. How easy it would have been for God to have just selected another priest, another couple to have John the Baptist. If Zechariah wasn’t going to believe, I’m sure there would have been another. And yet God didn’t. Just like he didn’t abandon Adam and Eve when they fell into sin, just like he didn’t abandon the people of Israel when they complained in the

wilderness, just like he didn't abandon his people when they were unfaithful to him. He still acted in patience with Zechariah.

But Zechariah did not dare test the patience of God by his unwillingness to participate in God's plan. Zechariah did not TAKE HIS CHANCES without God. In the next few months we are told he heeded the correction of God. His silence gave him plenty of opportunity to ponder. And when the time came and John was born, they wanted to name the boy Zechariah, after his father. But Zechariah demonstrated faith and followed the will of God by scratching out the name "John" on a tablet, and immediately his tongue was loosed, and he gave thanks to the Lord in a song, a song that we still sing today.

How comforting that is even to us today. That even during the times where we may have doubts about our faith or during the times when we have not always been as prepared as Christians as we could be, God is patient, God is good. While that is the case, we do not want to take God's patience with us as a license to sin, as a license to continue to be complacent in our faith. He has given the guarantee of eternal life, and given us the chance to demonstrate it now. May our faith mimic the faith of Zechariah when he followed the Lord's will in naming his son "John."

We do this first by taking every chance we get to demonstrate our Christian faith – through faithful worship and Bible study attendance, through hearts that prepare to hear the message of Christ coming as a baby in the manger, and as king of kings in the skies. We do this when our faith causes us to ask what can we do to help our fellow human beings both from a physical standpoint, but even more so from a spiritual standpoint. Our faith mimics Zechariah's, when we take the chance we've been given to be a Christian and make the most of it, instead of throwing it away and TAKING YOUR CHANCES with anything else.

There are many who like to play the "what-if" game. What if...Noah hadn't listened to God? What if...Adam and Eve had never sinned? But one "what-if" question we never have to doubt is, "what if God had never sent a Savior?" Because God did send a Savior, and he wants you to take a chance on that Savior. He wants you to take the change he has given you, to spend eternity with him, to spend eternity with the Christ-child. Amen.