

**“The Announcement to Zechariah: Good News to Be Believed”**

There are many ways to make an announcement. Here at Grace, we make many announcements. We try to keep people up-to-date with the variety of things that are going on, let them know when worship services, Bible studies, and other activities are taking place, and invite them to serve in different ways. We write announcements in worship folders and newsletters. We speak them aloud at worship services and in Bible studies. We send them out over email.

Sometimes people get more creative about their announcements. Couples find unique ways to announce when they are getting married, that they are going to have a baby, or even what the gender of the baby is. Some announcements are funny, some are surprising, and some are memorable for some other reason. But the real reason for an announcement is simply to make sure that some point of information gets shared with people who need it.

In the time leading up to the first Christmas, God had announcements to make. These were memorable messages sent to people who would play important roles in the unfolding of salvation's story. As we take the time in the next several weeks to prepare our hearts to welcome the Christ-child, we will be focusing our attention on these three Advent Announcements. Today our attention turns to the first account recorded in the Gospel according to St. Luke, the account of the announcement to Zechariah.

Zechariah was a common enough Jewish name. It seems to mean “the Lord remembers” or “one remembered by the Lord.” There had been a king of Israel named Zechariah, and a prophet with that name as well. The second-to-last book of our Old Testament is named for the prophet Zechariah. The name Zechariah may have been common enough, but the Zechariah about whom Luke wrote would have a special and unique role to play in God's salvation plan. This Zechariah was a priest. He served at God's temple in Jerusalem. At the time of our sermon text, Zechariah had been chosen by lot to go into the Temple to burn incense. As he did so, the people gathered outside the Temple in worship.

Outside, the people became confused and worried as time went by and Zechariah did not exit the Temple. Inside, things were even more astounding. There, directly to the side of the altar of incense appeared an angel, a holy messenger from God. And as is the case nearly every time that a human being encounters an angel, Zechariah was afraid. So the angel's first words to him were words of comfort, “Do not be afraid.” The angel was not there to harm or scare Zechariah, the angel was there with good news. Even in his old age, Zechariah and his wife would be blessed by God to have a son. This son would have an important role to play, and his parents were supposed to treat him accordingly. He was to be set apart for God's purposes in his life.

Zechariah couldn't believe it. He didn't believe it. He and his wife had prayed for a child for many years. They were old. They had long since come to terms with the fact that God had not seen fit to grant them this particular prayer. Perhaps by that time Zechariah had even given up on praying for what he now considered to be an impossible blessing.

It's easy enough for us to sympathize with Zechariah. We understand to a greater or lesser degree the world around us. Some things happen. Some things don't. A barren couple in their old age don't have children. That's not the way that things work. It's no wonder that Zechariah didn't believe the announcement, and it's not hard to imagine that we might not have either, if it had been given to us.

But there's a problem with that line of thinking. The problem is that we're ignoring the messenger. As unbelievable as this good news was, it was coming directly from an angel of the Lord who had appeared to Zechariah in the Lord's Temple. It was coming from an angel who knew what Zechariah and

Elizabeth had prayed for; it was coming from a holy messenger. This is why the angel had to reprimand Zechariah, saying, **“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. 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.”** As understandable as his doubt was, Zechariah’s unbelief was a sin.

And God, through his angel, dealt with Zechariah. The consequence of his unbelief would be that he was unable to speak until the time that his son, John, was born. For about nine months, Zechariah would not say a word. He wouldn’t be able to speak comfort and support to his wife as she carried their child. He wouldn’t be able to verbally respond to the words of congratulations from friends and family members. He wouldn’t be able to announce his joy. Instead, he would have a unique opportunity to consider for himself that amazing message that God had announced to him.

We often speak of Advent as a time for us to prepare our hearts. We often lament the busy-ness of this time of year and the commercialization of the holiday. We come to a special church service like this to focus our thought and our attention, to get away from the noise and the distraction. Zechariah had that sort of Advent preparation imposed on him. He had no choice but to have a quieter approach to the days before the birth of his son. And what do you suppose he thought about during that time? No doubt he regretted his unbelief. No doubt he sometimes wished that God would relent and allow him to speak again. But I also have no doubt that much of his reflection was on the good news itself, the message that the angel had announced to him.

And as he watched the child grow in Elizabeth’s womb, he saw God’s promise coming one step closer to being carried out. In the months of waiting, Zechariah began to realize the full significance of what the angel had announced to him. His son, John, would be the Elijah that the Old Testament had promised. He would be a new messenger to prepare the hearts of people. In the words of the angel, John would **“make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”** He would be the forerunner. He would be there to point the way to the Savior who would follow.

In just a few minutes, we’ll sing a hymn entitled, “Blest Be the God of Israel.” This hymn is a paraphrase of the first words that Zechariah spoke after the angel’s announcement. These words remind us how a gracious God had overcome the doubts of Zechariah and had through his word taught him about the important role John would play. After months of silence, Zechariah burst forth in a song of praise. He knew and he announced that God was acting at that very time to keep the promises he had made long before, especially the promise to save his people from their sins. Zechariah’s own son would be a messenger to prepare people to meet their Savior. Zechariah had come to believe the announcement of the angel.

God in his grace has allowed us to hear this angelic announcement on the pages of Scripture. He has given us this glimpse into his merciful dealings with a doubting sinner. This Advent is a time for us to admit our own sinful doubts and times of unbelief. It is a time for us to flee the distractions that surround us. It is a time for us to meditate on God’s Word and to be reassured of the promise of forgiveness. It is a time for us to thank God for keeping his promises and fulfilling his prophecies. Advent is a time for us to thank God for overcoming our doubts and distractions and making us ready – making us a people prepared for the Lord.

There are many ways to make an announcement, and some announcements are more important than others. Our Advent Announcements were vitally important for the original hearers, so God had them delivered by his holy messenger. And they are important enough for us that God had them recorded in his Word. This Advent, let’s take his announcements to heart.

The Text: Luke 1:1–25 (NIV84)

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,<sup>2</sup> just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,<sup>4</sup> so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.<sup>7</sup> But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

<sup>8</sup> Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,<sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.<sup>10</sup> And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

<sup>11</sup> Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.<sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God.<sup>17</sup> 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."

<sup>18</sup> Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

<sup>19</sup> 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."<sup>20</sup> 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."

<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> When his time of service was completed, he returned home.<sup>24</sup> After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.<sup>25</sup> "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."