

Zechariah & Elizabeth

We've been looking at the theme of older people in the Bible over the last few weeks - third age heroes as they have been described as well. Today I want us to look at another couple of third age heroes – the parents of John the Baptist, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Wait for the Lord

Luke 1:5-80

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. 8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' 18 Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' 19 The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 But now, 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.'

21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. 24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 25 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.' 26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' 34 Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' 35 The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.'

38 Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her. 39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.' 46 And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.' 56 And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

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. 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. 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. 67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: 68 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. 69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, 70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, 71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. 72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, 73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. 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 knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. 78 By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.' 80 The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

This passage specifically says that Zechariah was an old man. They were an old couple waiting for God and faithful to God, despite what they had gone through – childlessness. Their age didn't matter to God. He chose them to be the parents of the one whom Jesus described as the greatest person who has ever lived "Of those born of woman, there is no one greater than John". He was the one who paved the way for Jesus, and God chose old Zechariah and Elizabeth to bring him into the world. Note that the way this started was that Zechariah and Elizabeth were met by an angel. "within the context of the biblical tradition, it was appropriate that an event of such salvific importance should be announced by heavenly messengers" (Dict, p. 9)

"But suddenly in the beginning of Luke, when nothing is apparently happening, out of the 400-year silence it comes. Angels make a habit of showing up. The child John will be filled with the Holy Spirit. Zechariah breaks out in song, filled with the Holy Spirit. Before God sent the angel to Mary to announce the coming of the Lord, He sent an angel to Zechariah. The first one that God sent the angel to, to kick off this great news, was old Zechariah.

After all this time of waiting, you can just imagine the joy that must have filled these 2 people of God. try to think back to a time when you have just been so thankful to God for something.

It is significant that the name Zechariah means "The Lord remembers" The name Elizabeth means "My God is faithful" The name of their son John means "Grace of God". And that's exactly how they must have felt at having him, when God gave him to them – that this was indeed the grace of God in action blessing them in this way. And not just a son, but one who was, as the Bible says, filled with the Holy Spirit; who, as I said before, paved the way for the Son of God Himself. Once Zechariah declared that their son's name was to be John and his tongue was loosed again and he was able to speak, he sang a song of praise to God:

No wonder Zechariah sings this song:

Luke 1:67-79

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: 'Blessed be the Lord 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. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

Zechariah makes it clear in his song that this saviour is one of regal birth, as he mentions that God has raised up a saviour for us in the house of his servant David.

This mention of the house of David is mentioned by Luke for a reason. When Luke tells the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, he makes clear links to the Old Testament, especially when Zechariah says of his new son, "And you child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways.

Compare this to Malachi 3:1, which mentions sending a messenger to prepare the way before me. Zechariah then makes another link, this time to Isaiah, when he proclaims that God's salvation will "give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death". Luke emphasises the Old Testament links so we can see the significance of what God is doing. This is not some obscure event. This is all part of God's salvation plan. God is bringing his long awaited salvation into the world, and he is using people like Zechariah and Elizabeth to do it.

To stress the significance of this event even further however, even before the links to the Old Testament, Luke emphasises that Zechariah was a person of great significance in his society. He was a priest in a group who "served in the temple twice a year for one week. During their Temple service, duties were divided among the priests by lot, with the greatest honour falling to the one chosen to enter the Temple and burn incense. Luke states that Zechariah was chosen for this exceptional duty, which could be performed by a priest only once in his lifetime." (Dict, p. 635)

Now note the similarities between John the Baptist's birth and that of Jesus. Over in Nazareth, Elizabeth's relative Mary has also seen an angel. The Holy Spirit will visit her and provide her with a son, the Son of God. And when the two women meet, Elizabeth will shout out, "filled with the Holy Spirit." And Zechariah, the father of John, breaks his silence with this prophecy, "filled with the Holy Spirit." And even as Zechariah sings, Jesus is en route. The Spirit of God has broken out of waiting. God was working all the time."

<http://www.bethanypc.org/sermons/serm2004/112804sr.htm>

Look at the similarities between the stories of John's birth and Jesus' birth:

- Both miraculous – Elizabeth was barren, Mary was a virgin
- Both foretold by an angel
- Both Zechariah and Mary were reassured by the angel in the midst of their fear
- Zechariah and Mary both sang songs of praise to God – and both were
- "filled with the Holy Spirit". Mary's is the more well known but look at Zechariah's

Note here too that when Luke writes this story, he specifically mentions their childlessness. He mentions that Elizabeth also comes from a priestly family, and so their marriage "protected the purity and dignity of the priesthood". He also mentions that, though they are childless, they are blameless before God. Their childlessness is not the result of some sin. It is just one of the sad events of life. Luke is again reminding us of similar events in the Old Testament here. In the Old Testament, there are no less than 6 women mentioned who are barren. They are Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, the wife of Manoah, Hannah, and the Shunnamite woman in 2 Kings 4. But these sad stories of these barren women actually point to the grace of God working in these people's lives despite their despair. None of these women are being punished for individual sins, but what does happen is that, with every one of them except the Shunnamite woman, God gives them a child, and not only that, a child of great significance in Israelite history.

These are the children:

- Sarah – Isaac
- Rebekah – Jacob
- Rachel – Joseph
- Wife of Manoah – Samson
- Hannah – Samuel

The barrenness of these women is an opportunity for God to work. However, of course their barrenness is not the main issue. The main issue is God's purpose. The children that are eventually born to these women, while giving great joy, are not given for their purpose, but for His

purpose. The childlessness of Zechariah and Elizabeth is an opportunity for their great faithfulness in times of incredible trial. The trial was not just the pain of childlessness, but the disgrace that Elizabeth mentions that she has experienced among her people. So their childlessness is not just an opportunity for their faithfulness, but also for the amazing grace of God to be shown to bring about His purposes of salvation.

Throughout all the years of their childlessness, God was hard at work, preparing a couple of old people like Zechariah and Elizabeth to bear the one who was to announce the greatest news in history.

When we wait and wait and wait, when nothing seems to be happening in our lives, rest assured that God is still at work. Rest assured that at these times He is even doing his *deepest* work in you. You see, we tend to think God is working in our lives when we *feel* it. But it's when we don't feel it, when God seems a million miles away, that He is hard at work. God is not a feeling – He is the Lord of our lives, but how often do we really believe it? In his song of praise, Zechariah does not forget God's faithfulness to Him. The long hard years of childlessness and God's seeming distance are not forgotten either, because they make Zechariah all the more grateful for this son who has been given to them.

However, in their joy at the birth of their son, both Zechariah and Elizabeth remain humble. They ascribe to John his important role in history, but they don't overstate him either. They keep in mind John's subordinate role to Jesus. Despite their incredible joy at finally being blessed with their own son, Zechariah and Elizabeth still have God's intentions in mind. They haven't become carried away with the whole event.

In our society, elderly people are often seen as in the way. It's a young person's world, we're told. However in many other societies around the world, elderly people are held in high esteem. One thing that I was told when I was in my teens and twenties was to surround yourself as much as possible with people who are older than you; people who have the life experience and wisdom that you don't have. I have learned a lot from elderly people in my life - people who have emphasised the importance to me of not wasting my life; people who have offered so much to me in terms of wisdom and life experience. A quote that stuck out at me from an article that was read out here a couple of weeks ago really emphasises this point: "older people can be effective youth leaders because their testimony of walking with Christ through many years gives that testimony its own authenticity and integrity, which cannot be matched by the young and energetic."

There is simply no substitute for age. The fact that I'm preaching here today is both a privilege and a daunting responsibility because I know that some of the things I say have probably been experienced by you here many times over in your lives. I have so much to learn from **you**. Another quote near the end of the article is very powerful as well: basically, to paraphrase it, those of us who are younger in years must be careful not to sell out to the prevailing culture of ageism. Rather, like Jesus, we are called to be counter-cultural in this area as in so many others. I mentioned earlier that our culture doesn't value elderly people as much as it should. But Jesus does. He was counter-cultural, walking all over the prevailing cultures of his day, speaking to women when they were not to be spoken to, and making Samaritans the heroes of his stories when they were the despised enemy. In the deep question of 'why would God visit me?', why would he choose old me to play such a significant role in His salvation, the answer is because God has no favourites – age is no barrier to God. Nothing is a barrier to God. This is a God, remember, who always comes to those the world often sees as 'the least of these'. But they are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And you know what? It's all true!

by Nils von Kalm
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