

Sermon for Advent Mid-Week Service I

Date: December 5, 2018

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Malachi 4:1-6

Gospel Reading: Luke 1:5-25

Sermon Text: Luke 1:5-25

Sermon Title: God is not amused with our unbelief.

Psalm: Psalm 25

Hymns:

LSB 348 – The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns

LSB 354 – Arise, O Christian People

LSB 338 – Comes Thou Long Expected Jesus

LSB 343 – Prepare the Royal Highway

Liturgy:

Divine Service: Special



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Text: Luke 1:5-25

⁵ When Herod was king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah {zak-ah-RYE-ah}, who belonged to the division of priests named after Abijah{ab-EYE-ja}. Zechariah's wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Zechariah and Elizabeth had God's approval. They followed all the Lord's commands and regulations perfectly. ⁷ Yet, they never had any children because Elizabeth couldn't become pregnant. Both of them were too old to have children.

⁸ Zechariah was on duty with his division of priests. As he served in God's presence, ⁹ he was chosen by priestly custom to go into the Lord's temple to burn incense. ¹⁰ All the people were praying outside while he was burning incense. ¹¹ Then, to the right of the incense altar, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. ¹² Zechariah was troubled and overcome with fear.

¹³ The angel said to him, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife Elizabeth will have a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴ He will be your pride and joy, and many people will be glad that he was born. ¹⁵ As far as the Lord is concerned, he will be a great man. He will never drink wine or any other liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring many people in Israel back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ He will go ahead of the Lord with the spirit and power that Elijah {ee-LYE-ja} had. He will change parents' attitudes toward their children. He will change disobedient people so that they will accept the wisdom of those who have God's approval. In this way he will prepare the people for their Lord."

¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, "What proof is there for this? I'm an old man, and my wife is beyond her childbearing years."

¹⁹ The angel answered him, "I'm Gabriel! I stand in God's presence. God sent me to tell you this good news. ²⁰ But because you didn't believe what I said, you will be unable to talk until the day this happens. Everything will come true at the right time."

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah. They were amazed that he was staying in the temple so long. ²² When he did come out, he was unable to speak to them. So they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. He motioned to them but remained unable to talk.

²³ When the days of his service were over, he went home. ²⁴ Later, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and didn't go out in public for five months. She said, ²⁵ "The Lord has done this for me now. He has removed my public disgrace."

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Grace, peace, and mercy be yours in the name of the coming Messiah, Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Zechariah is a man we really don't know very much about. We do know he was of the tribe and lineage of Levi because he was a priest, and all priests are to come from the tribe of Levi. Beyond that the Bible really doesn't tell us too much about him. However, if we study the people and the way they lived, we might be able to guess some things about how he might have lived. We can't know for sure, but maybe, just maybe, we can learn something about this man whose name means, "The Lord Remembers."

Zachariah was married to a good woman. A believing woman who supported and honored her husband. Her name was Elizabeth. She had always felt honored to be married to such a Godly man as Zachariah. She grew up in a good old fashioned traditional home. When the marriage was first arranged she was so happy. It was years later that she confided in her mother, "I fell in love with Zachariah the first time I saw him at school. I couldn't believe it when dad came home with the news that I would marry him. My heart has been filled with nothing but joy from that day. He is so good to me mom."

Zachariah always was a respected and Godly man. Everyone in town knew him and enjoyed his stories and lessons he would use to teach them. It was, in those days however, often considered a curse from God to have no children. It never crossed anyone's mind that Zachariah could have done anything wrong. They would never say it out loud, not even in secret, but they always wondered what Elizabeth might have done to dishonor God and her husband to shame him in this way.

Zachariah was a wise man. He knew those breathless whispers were lurking around town. He knew what people would think about his precious bride. It was for that reason that he would always talk about her devotion, and his deep love for her. He would never mention, not even in the most secret place, how disappointed he was not to have any children. But he did love Elizabeth. More than any words could ever describe.

Being such a Godly man Zachariah moved up through the ranks of the priesthood. He served the Lord in many ways. The rotation of duties at the Temple would come and go. He would spend his rotation living at the Temple assisting with the work that needed to be done. He loved his work, and he loved working in the great and awesome Temple – even if Herod had built it. Still it was a place devoted to God and he was honored to serve there.

As much as it filled his heart to enter the Temple, to serve there, to enter that sacred room called the Holy Place, his thoughts always wandered home when he was alone. When the time of service was ended and the next rotation of priests came to the Temple, his walk home was always a little faster than his walk toward Jerusalem. His stride home was driven by the thoughts of the woman he loved.

Zachariah was now an old man. Having come to peace with knowing he would never have children, he served his God and honored his wife at all times. Once again, as it had so many, many, times before, the rotation for service in the Temple came to his division.¹ He traveled that

¹ Luke 1:8

long road from his little village somewhere in the remote part of the land given to the tribe of Judah, out in the hills,² to the great city of Jerusalem. Every time he crested that last hill and saw the great City of David his heart leapt up into his throat. Even after so many years it still filled him with awe and wonder as he thought of the promised Messiah who would one day enter this city, just as he was today, but He would come to redeem the whole world forever.

Zachariah walked the narrow crowded streets to the center of the great city and entered the Temple. There were back doors for the priests to get in and out more easily, but he would never use them. He always entered through those great front doors. He always wanted to remember where he was, and why he was there.

As he had so many times before, he put his things into the room where he would stay during his time of service. He prepared for his work by performing all of the ceremonies and sacrifices required by God. Ceremonies that had been performed since the time of Moses and Aaron, and, “Here today I perform them just as they did.” He would whisper to himself.



The Temple



Alter of Incense

The routine was just that, routine. Nothing special happened. He had no idea, no premonition, but his life was about to change in ways he had never dared to imagine. It had in fact never even crossed his mind. Being the revered and honored man that he was among the people, he was chosen to enter the Holy Place to offer the incense before the Lord Most High. This was a special honor given only to the most faithful men. To enter the Holy Place alone, to stand so near the presence of God.

The day came. He prepared himself as the Law of Moses commanded. He was dressed in the priestly robes and was handed the incense. He knew the traditions well. He was not nervous, but he was filled with the honor of the task. He walked to the gilded alter and began the ceremony of The Offering of Incense. Everything was done just as he had been taught by his father, from the time he was a young boy. Utterly alone in the surreal quiet of the Holy Place, his whole being was focused on nothing but his worship to the Lord Most High. He was so focused on the chanting of the ancient Scriptures, and the smell of the incense as it burned, and the smoke as it rolled sweetly upwards like prayers ascending to Heaven, that he did not immediately notice that he was not alone.

When he first became aware of someone behind him he was filled with holy rage, and fear.³ To enter the Holy Place unprepared was certain death. This person was not only a fool, but a dead fool, and Zachariah was sure he was about to see the Hand of God slay this person right before his eyes.

² Like 1:39

³ Luke 1:12

He turned to look at this “dead-man-walking” to chide him for his foolishness... Then Zachariah saw him. The man was dressed in clothes that shown like the Sun. Zachariah knew instantly this was no man, but an angel. An angel who had seen the face of God.⁴ Instantly Zachariah’s anger turned to dread that gripped his heart. He knew his own sins, he knew his own unworthiness, he knew he had no right to stand in the presence of one who had seen the face of God. He fell to the ground and buried his face in his arms, too afraid to even speak.

Then that powerful clarion voice fell on his ears as the angel spoke. “Do not be afraid Zachariah, for your prayers have been heard.”⁵

Zachariah’s thoughts instantly went to the prayers he had just offered at the Alter of Incense. He was confused and his thoughts raced as he tried to understand why God would send an angel to tell him what his faith had told him every day of his life. God always hears our prayers.⁶

The angel continued to speak, “Your wife Elizabeth...”

Zachariah’s heart stopped. His thoughts raced. “No Lord” he thought, “hold nothing against my wife. Let me bear any punishment that my love might deserve.”

“...will bear you a son, and you will call his name John. You will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth for he will be great before the Lord. He must not drink wine, or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even while he is still in his mother’s womb. He will turn many of the Children of Israel to their God, and he will go before the Messiah, in spirit and power like Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. To make the people ready for the coming of Emmanuel⁷”

Zachariah’s mind was reeling with so much emotion and confusion he could barely think. “A son!? Elizabeth and I are so old.” he thought. Almost without thinking the words came out of his mouth, “How can this be? I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.”⁸

The angel’s tone suddenly changed. There was anger in his voice. “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God. I was sent to speak to you, and to bring this good news. Now behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.”⁹

Meanwhile the people, who had been reciting the liturgy and prayers since Zachariah had entered the Holy Place, were now waiting in silence. The liturgy and prayers had ended and they had been waiting for what seemed like a very long time. Having heard nothing from the Holy Place they were starting to get concerned. Everyone knew if a man entered the Holy Place unworthily he would be struck down by God. “But not Zachariah!” they all thought to themselves.

As quickly as the angel had appeared, he left. Zachariah regained some of his composure. He walked out before the people to tell them the vision he had seen, but when he opened his mouth... He could not speak.

4 Luke 1:19

5 Luke 1:13

6 Psalm 66:17-20

7 Emmanuel means: God with us. See Isaiah 7:14

8 Luke 1:18

9 Luke 1:19-20

Zachariah completed his service in the Temple as required by the Law of Moses. He returned home still unable to speak. The entire city was full of whispers and rumors, and pointing fingers as he walked by. The walk home was long, but in time all of what Gabriel had told him came true.

In time his voice returned and all that happened was told to many people. Especially to his son. Yes a son! He had a son! His name was John, and Zachariah made certain that all the angel had commanded was done.¹⁰ He never doubted God again.

Our God is a faithful, loving, and caring God who desperately wants us to know of that love and the salvation which He earned for us by sending His only Son to pay the full price for our shortcomings. However, He is still God. He is worthy of our respect, honor, and praise. Too often we take His forgiving heart for granted, and do not think about what we are truly saying when we do not do what He commands, and do not believe what He has promises. Too often we call Him a liar.

Zachariah learned a hard lesson that day, as he stood in the presents of the angel Gabriel. A lesson I'm sure he never forgot. A lesson you would do well to learn. God's Word is true. God's promises are sure. Your salvation has been won. This Christmas season remember how God fulfilled all of those ancient promises made throughout the Old Testament. Those promises of a Messiah who would save all people from their sins. Kindle in your hearts a fire that burns out the complacency, that lights within you the excitement and anticipation that Christmas brings to little children. Let that anticipation be, not only for the gifts under the tree, but even more importantly for that ultimate gift won for you on another tree.¹¹

You see that baby we are waiting for, He is Immanuel – God With Us. In just a few short weeks a young woman named Mary will look into the eyes of the Author of Life, as she hold Him in her arms. Those are the same eyes you will look into when you enter Heaven's gate. I expect you will see the same thing she saw in those eyes – Love. A love we should never take for granted.

May God make it so.

Amen.



10 Luke 1:57-66

11 A cross was often referred to, or called, a tree.