

Sermon for Advent Mid-Week #1

Date: December 4, 2019

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

Old Testament: Isaiah 40:1–5

Epistle Reading: Hebrews 10:5–18

Gospel Reading: Luke 1:5–25



Sermon Text: Luke 1:5–25

Sermon Title: The Child Who Is Zechariah's Hope

Hymns:

LSB 350 – Come, Thou Precious Ransom, Come

LSB 357 – O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

LSB 936 – Sing Praise to the God of Israel

LSB 720 – We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight

LSB 343 – Prepare the Royal Highway

Liturgy:

Divine Service: Creative Worship



Pastor James Groleau
St. John's Lutheran Church
1200 13th Avenue NW
Austin, MN 55912
Office: (507) 433-2642
Shepherd@JamesPlace.net
StJohnsAustinLCMS.org
FaceBook.com/StJohnsAustin
Twitter.com/@StJohnsAustinMN
FaceBook.com/Shepherd.James.Groleau
KAUS 1480 AM Sun. 9:00am



Text: Luke 1:5–25

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”

And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And 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.”

And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”

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Peace to you from the Prince of Peace. Amen.

The silencing of Zechariah is quite an extraordinary scene. Zechariah was a priest who made his living with his voice. His vocation, his job, was to bless, to pray, to teach, and there he stood, like a quarterback without an arm, voiceless in the Temple, unable to fulfill his Temple service by giving the Aaronic Blessing,¹ the benediction. Zechariah was a descendant of the priestly family of Aaron. Aaron's part in the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt was to speak eloquently.² Yet, Zechariah a descendant of Aaron, stood there unable to utter a word.

The irony here goes even further than that. Zechariah's name means "God Remembers." When Gabriel told Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a child even in her old age, God was remembering His people just as He had promised. When the Bible speaks of God remembering, it is not simply His reminiscing about the past. When God remembers, He acts. So God remembered His people on the day Gabriel told Zechariah he would have a miraculous son, a son who would come to prepare the people for the promised Messiah.

God's action that day in the Temple fulfilled Zechariah's own name in the most amazing way. Yet, the one whose name means "God Remembers" did not believe that God was could or would remember or act. He forgot. He forgot God's faithfulness and trustworthiness of old. He forgot what God did for Abraham and barren Sarah, Isaac and barren Rebekah, Jacob and barren Rachel. He forgot just how good God is and he doubted God's Word.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are both described as "righteous before God."³ That's because their hope was in the Lord, and in His promise to act and send the promised Messiah. Zechariah no doubt prayed regularly for this. Yet when the Lord answered his prayer he doubted the word of the angel and wanted a sign. His offense was not in expecting too much from the Lord. It was in expecting too little.

I once read a story of a beggar who approached Alexander the Great asking for a gift. Feeling exceedingly generous, Alexander ordered the beggar to be given the government of five cities. The beggar was taken by surprise and said, "I didn't ask for that much."

Alexander said, "You asked like the man you are; I give like the man I am."

1 Numbers 6:22-27 (It is called the Aaronic Blessing after Arron, Moses' brother, who was to bless the people with these words, as would all priests who follow him.)

2 Exodus 4:14

3 Luke 1:6

Our God is generous. He gives us exceedingly great and precious promises. He invites us to ask and has promised to answer. He gives us more than we either desire or deserve. He is exceedingly generous. That is who He is, but we, like Zechariah, so easily forget. We don't expect much from Him. That's who we are.

We, like Zechariah, are priests called to deliver the Good News to all people, but we are priests that easily forget. God's indescribable goodness has made you His royal priests⁴ through Holy Baptism.⁵ God in mercy has chosen you as His own possession and set apart your mouth to do priestly work: to pray, to teach, to proclaim His goodness. You have every reason to be bold and confident in your prayers, but instead you've doubted, and have thought, "What good will my prayers do?"

You have every reason to be confident in the Lord, but you've doubted that He knows what He's doing. You have every reason to live with joy in all circumstances, knowing that you are a beggar who has been granted a kingdom; yet you live, think, and pray like God is stingy and unlikely to help. You are royal priests of the King of kings, but you insult the King by not expecting all that much. We often ask as people of little faith, and it grieves the Holy Spirit. We are like Zechariah. We so easily forget God's fatherly goodness, but God does not forget. God remembers.

He does not forget His promises, and He does not forget us His priests. He remembered Zechariah's prayer and acted. God gave Zechariah way more than he expected. Zechariah hoped for the Messiah, and God gave the Messiah within Zechariah's own lifetime and within his extended family. Old Zechariah hoped he might be a father and God gave him a great child—John, the forerunner, the one who prepared the way for the Greater Child who is Immanuel, God in the flesh.

The ultimate instance of God remembering us was to send the One to whom John pointed, the One who is the greatest and most faithful High Priest. He would remember perfectly and trust the Father's faithfulness in our place. He would always have a confident hope in God, even in the most hopeless situations. He would do all this so that His faithfulness might be credited to you in your Baptism. He would be, not only the most holy Priest, but also the most holy Lamb.⁶ The Lamb of God sacrificed for you. The Lamb whose blood would pay for all your doubt and mistrust of God.

4 1 Peter 2:9

5 1 Corinthians 6:19

6 John 1:29

Because God has remembered us, we have a “Great High Priest.”⁷ He used His voice mightily to bless, to pray, to teach, and to call sinners to salvation. He was the most faithful Priest, but He chose to be silent before His accusers and go to an unjust death in our place. He was the Greater Aaron. He hung on a cross with arms outstretched like a priest in prayer, uttering an eloquent absolution: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He is the Greater Zechariah, who always remembers. He never lost hope that His Father would raise Him from the dead as promised. He is your eternal High Priest, seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty as your intercessor and advocate.

We must never forget who we are. Like Zechariah, we are poor, pitiful beggars, deserving no good thing from the Lord, but we must also never forget who the Lord is: gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.⁸ God remembered Zechariah and gave him a son to proclaim the Messiah. God remembers you, forgives you, and acts, providing for you in Holy Absolution. He remembers your need for holiness and acts, providing it for you in Holy Baptism. He remembers your need for strength and courage to live under the cross with patience and joy and acts, providing it all for you in the Holy Supper.

In Advent, we are especially reminded that we are waiting for the appearing, the second coming, of our blessed hope, Jesus Christ, who will bring us into His glorious kingdom. A kingdom beyond anything we can imagine. Yet even now, He exceeds our puny expectations. We ask Him for some comfort for our wounded consciences, and He applies a double portion.⁹ We ask Him, like beggars, to give us a little help, and He gives us a Kingdom. We ask for help enduring the pains of life and He gives us the promise of full and complete healing in the resurrection, and eternal life.

At John’s birth, Zechariah’s voice would again be heard, but at another Child’s birth soon following, angels’ voices would be heard singing , “peace to His people on earth.” What Child Is This? This is Jesus Christ, the Savior, Zechariah’s hope and ours.

Amen.

7 Hebrews 4:14
8 Psalm 145:8
9 Isaiah 40:2