

“The Gift of the Angels”

**Luke 1:5-20**

By Rev Gary Walters

Our scripture this morning comes from Luke Chapter 1 and I'm going to read verses 5 through 20. "In the time of Herrod, King of Judah, there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah, his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron and both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But, they had no children because Elizabeth was barren and they were both well along in years. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty, he was serving as priest before God. He was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of God and burn incense and when the time for the burning of the incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. Then the angel of the Lord appeared to him standing at the right side of the alter of incense and when Zechariah saw him he was startled and was gripped with fear. 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. And he will be a joy and a delight to you and many will rejoice because of his birth 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 and many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God and he will go on beyond the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the father's to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' Zechariah asked the angel 'How can I be sure of this? I'm an old man and my wife is well along in years.' Then 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 and now you will be silent and not be able to speak until the day this happens because you did not believe my words which will come true at their proper time.'." The word of God for the people of God, Thanks be to God.

Well, Art and I are talking about the different gifts that the various characters of the nativity story bring throughout this advent season. Today we're looking at the gift of the angels. There has been a lot of hype, and attention paid to angels of late. I don't know, we might have climaxed and are on the downhill slope of all that; but you know their is "The Angel In The Outfield" and about 20 other spins off of that movie, they have their own TV show and they've really worked their way into popular culture. But, long before they were in popular culture, they were well integrated into the biblical story. In fact, there are over 300 references to angelic-type messengers, or angels, in the scriptures, 300!---that's a bunch. Especially with the start of advent season we can't overlook Zechariah has his experience with the angel, but so does Mary, so does Joseph, so do the shepherds and it just goes on and on and on. In fact, in our own day and age there are a number of those stories.

John Patton was a missionary to the Melanesians in the 18th century and one of the first white people they had ever seen and as he was ministering among these folks, resistance rose to their ministry and the warriors of their island one night surrounded their home with the intent to kill them. John Patton and his wife and children spent a very fearful night, praying that the Lord would protect them and for some miracle of some sort, but nothing happened. But then, nothing happened! The warriors surrounded their house and it didn't seem that any great deliverance had happened, that any great miracle had happened, but still the warriors stayed their distance and as morning came they could see the warriors drifting back into the

jungle. About a year later the chief of those peoples was converted to Christianity and shortly after a lot of the villagers and those same warriors. John Patton then had the opportunity to ask the chief of that village the question that had intrigued him that whole year, "Why did you not attack?". The chief said, "We were afraid of your guards." And John said, "There were no guards!" The Chief was adamant, he said "The tall men, with the swords. We were afraid of your guards, the tall men with the swords that surrounded your hut." Well, make of that what you will but whether he knew it or not, I think that John Patton and his family were surrounded by angels.

There is a lot of interesting things going on in this story and a lot of different parts we could talk about. John the Baptizer is a fascinating character and Luke gives us a lot of clues as to what he is going to be like with all the references to the prophets from the Old Testament and that John is going to be the last of this great line. But that's another sermon and another day. What I really want to look at for just a moment is Zechariah. Imagine for a moment being Zechariah and Elizabeth being childless. Luke draws a great contrast here because they are righteous, they are the right kind of people in terms of the bloodline, the right type of people in terms of what they are doing, he is a priest, they are righteous and they are observing all the Lord's laws and yet they are childless. Those two things standing in stark contrast to one another because in that day and age it was believed to be the hand of God that would prevent you from having children and it was nothing but punishment from God. Luke holds these two things in tension and sets it out as a challenge.

Zechariah is in the temple, let me demonstrate. Imagine our top alter platform is the Holy of Holies, which only one person could enter (the high priest) once a year. Zechariah, would be about 10 feet from the Holy of Holies separated from the very presence of God by nothing but a curtain. An alter stood in front of him which he had to burn incense on. The smoke of which would enter into the Holy of Holies The Israelites believed that God dwelt upon the ark of the covenant. So to have this angel appear would be startling to say the least. This area was holy in a way we can not even imagine. That Zechariah is filled with fear is an understatement. Very few people would ever have the opportunity to stand where Zechariah is. In fact when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement it was so holy they tied a rope to his foot in case he died, they could drag him out without violating that holiness or that space. As far as the priests go, only select few ever entered into the place where Zechariah stands in this story. Twice a day a priest would enter, once in the morning and again in the evening, to offer incense along with the prayers of the people.

In fact, his chances of being selected were about a quarter of 1%. The average Israelite would never even enter the sanctuary or court yard of the priests, that was for the priest and the priests alone. A good Hebrew male would bring his sacrifice to the opening of the courtyard and hand his offering to the priest who would then take it in and sacrifice it and bring the meat back to that man. The Jewish women were not allowed into that court yard and beyond that the gentiles had their courtyard. This was extremely holy space, you did not enter here lightly. And very few entered it at all.

All that to say, it's understandable that Zechariah was filled with fear. Being wowed, its surprising then that he has the audacity, to argue or to doubt this angel. Remember he is two steps away from the presence of God. We know that we are always in the presence of God but for the Israelites, it was different the presence of God dwelt in the temple in a unique way. So he argues and has to suffer the consequences. Before we judge too quickly, Zechariah

was an old man and the angel says "Your prayers have been heard." It's questionable as to whether Zechariah actually offered a prayer that his wife Elizabeth might become pregnant when he was standing before this alter. Although, over the years and over the decades there were perhaps hundreds, if not thousands of prayers, for a child. I think the weight of all that unanswered prayer. So he was a bit skeptical, and understandably so.

The angel gives Zechariah a sign, he is going to be mute until this child is born. The sign is also punishment, but certainly God has a sense of humor. The answer to all those prayers wasn't no, but it is just wait and see. And who is born?, John the Baptizer, who prepares the way for the Lord. Who brings this hope, who brings this light, who is life in a situation that appeared dead. Elizabeth was not going to have a child, except by the intervening hand of God. I think that's the gift that the angel brings. Not that the angel is going to bring a child for you and I but instead that message of hope, that message of life, even in the midst of our impossible situations. Because where the hand of God is, anything is possible.

The challenge for us isn't that we are going to question the angel, but we are not going to hear them at all. Another part of the angel thing in scriptures, those 300 references to angelic messengers, the word angel that the scripture uses is actually "messenger." It uses that word just as often for human messengers as it does the angelic. The danger for all of us is that in the hustle and bustle of preparing for this season we will simply miss the message that God has sent to us, that we will prepare our homes, we will prepare our church, but will forget to prepare our hearts. The challenge is to slow down long enough, to be quiet long enough, to hear God speak. To be thoughtful enough in our day to day actions and reactions that when that messenger comes, whether it is through scripture, whether it's through the words of a friend, a coworker, a family member, or whether its from an angel, that we would hear God speaking his message of hope and life to us. That message of the advent story, the nativity story.

There are a lot of ways we can prepare ourselves and one really simple one is to take the advent calender with you, that are at the doors on the way out if you don't already have one. There is a scripture there and a thought for the day and it would take you 30 seconds to read. Hopefully you take more than 30 seconds, because as you read that and read the thought and the scripture, that you linger over the words and let them speak to you, that message of hope. Don't miss the messenger. Don't miss the angels.

Would you pray with me: Lord we thank you that you send your messengers to us, so give us the eyes and ears to receive that word that you have for us. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.