

Luke 1:5-25, 39-45, 57-80 – "When God Interrupts"

Text: Luke 1:5-25, 39-45, 57-80 (CSB)

The Announcement to Zechariah (1:5-25)

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest of Abijah's division named Zechariah. His wife was from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. **6** Both were righteous in God's sight, living without blame according to all the commands and requirements of the Lord. **7** But they had no children because Elizabeth could not conceive, and both of them were well along in years.

8 When his division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, **9** according to the custom of the priesthood he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. **10** At the hour of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside.

11 An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. **12** When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and overcome with fear. **13** But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. **14** There will be joy and delight for you, and many will rejoice at his birth. **15** For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and will never drink wine or beer. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb. **16** And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. **17** And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people."

18 "How can I be sure of this?" Zechariah asked the angel. "For I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years." **19** The angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and tell you this good news. **20** Now listen. You will become silent and unable to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time."

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, amazed that he stayed so long in the sanctuary. **22** When he did come out, he could not speak to them. Then they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He was making signs to them and remained speechless. **23** When the days of his ministry were completed, he went back home. **24** After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived and kept herself in

seclusion for five months. 25 She said, "The Lord has done this for me. He has looked with favor in these days to take away my disgrace among the people."

Mary Visits Elizabeth (1:39-45)

39 In those days Mary set out and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea 40 where she entered Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped inside her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 Then she exclaimed with a loud cry: "Blessed are you among women, and your child will be blessed! 43 How could this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For you see, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped for joy inside me. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill what he has spoken to her!"

John's Birth and Zechariah's Prophecy (1:57-80)

57 Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she had a son. 58 Then her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her his great mercy, and they rejoiced with her.

59 When they came to circumcise the child on the eighth day, they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. 60 But his mother responded, "No. He will be called John." 61 Then they said to her, "None of your relatives has that name." 62 So they motioned to his father to find out what he wanted him to be called. 63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they were all amazed. 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 Fear came on all those who lived around them, and all these things were being talked about throughout the hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard about him took it to heart, saying, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the Lord's hand was with him.

67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: 68 "Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and provided redemption for his people. 69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, 70 just as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets in ancient times; 71 salvation from our enemies and from the hand of those who hate us. 72 He has dealt mercifully with our fathers and remembered his holy covenant— 73 the oath that he swore to our father Abraham. 74 He has granted that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, would serve him without fear 75 in holiness and righteousness in his presence 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 his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. 78 Because of our God's merciful compassion, the dawn from on high will visit us 79 to shine on those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

80 The child grew up and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

Key Background:

- **Context of Luke's Gospel:** Luke begins his Gospel not with Jesus, but with the story of John the Baptist's miraculous birth. This sets the stage for God breaking 400 years of prophetic silence and demonstrates that God's salvation plan involves careful preparation and faithful people positioned to receive His purposes.
- **The 400 Years of Silence:** Between the end of the Old Testament (Malachi) and John's announcement, God had sent no prophets to Israel. No angels appeared. No divine messages. The faithful simply waited, served, and hoped. Gabriel's appearance to Zechariah breaks this centuries-long silence with the most important announcement since the prophets: the Messiah is coming.
- **Zechariah's Name:** Means "Yahweh remembers." His very name testified to God's faithfulness to remember His promises, even when decades of personal prayer seemed unanswered.
- **Elizabeth's Name:** Means "God is my oath" or "my God is abundance." Her name declared God's covenant faithfulness, even as she endured the social shame of childlessness in a culture that viewed it as divine disfavor.
- **The Priestly Division of Abijah:** King David organized Israel's priests into 24 divisions that rotated temple service throughout the year (1 Chronicles 24:10). Zechariah belonged to the eighth division. Each priest in a division served only two one-week periods per year, making the opportunity to burn incense extraordinarily rare—many priests never received this honor in their lifetime.
- **Burning Incense:** This was the highest honor a priest could receive during temple service. The priest would enter the Holy Place alone while the people prayed outside. The rising incense symbolized the prayers of God's people ascending to heaven (Psalm 141:2, Revelation 8:3-4). This sacred moment was when God chose to interrupt Zechariah's life.

- **Righteous and Blameless:** These terms don't mean sinless perfection but rather faithful obedience to God's covenant. Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in consistent, authentic devotion to God despite decades of unanswered prayer and social stigma. Their character positioned them to receive God's purposes.
- **Gabriel the Messenger:** This is only the second time Gabriel appears in Scripture by name. His previous appearance was to Daniel (Daniel 8:16, 9:21), where he explained prophecies about the coming Messiah. His reappearance after 500+ years signals that the prophetic countdown has begun—the Messiah is about to arrive.
- **John's Nazirite Calling:** The command that John would "never drink wine or beer" marks him as a Nazirite (Numbers 6:1-21), someone specially set apart for God's service. Only two others in Scripture were Nazirites from birth: Samson and Samuel—both called to deliver God's people during critical moments in history.
- **"Spirit and Power of Elijah":** Malachi 4:5-6 prophesied that Elijah would return before "the great and terrible day of the Lord" to prepare the people. John would fulfill this role (Matthew 11:14), preparing hearts for the Messiah through a message of repentance. Like Elijah, John would be bold, prophetic, and uncompromising.
- **Filled with the Holy Spirit from the Womb:** This was unprecedented in Scripture. While the Spirit came upon people for specific tasks (judges, kings, prophets), John would be permanently filled from conception. Even before birth, John's first prophetic act was leaping in Elizabeth's womb when Mary (pregnant with Jesus) arrived.
- **The Naming Controversy:** Jewish custom typically named sons after fathers or family members to preserve family identity and honor ancestors. Naming the child "John" (meaning "Yahweh is gracious") broke with tradition and required faith—it declared that God's plan took precedence over human expectation.
- **Nine Months of Silence:** Zechariah's muteness wasn't merely punishment but protective discipline. Unable to speak, he was forced to ponder, meditate, and trust God's word. The silence prepared him to speak with prophetic authority when his voice returned.
- **Zechariah's Prophecy (The Benedictus):** Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah's first words after nine months of silence were worship and prophecy. His song (vv. 68-79) connected God's ancient promises to Abraham and David with the immediate arrival

of the Messiah. It's called the "Benedictus" (Latin for "blessed") from its opening word.

- **The Wilderness Preparation:** John grew up in the Judean wilderness, separated from the religious establishment and temple system. This isolation prepared him to speak with prophetic independence and radical dependence on God alone—essential for his mission to confront religious hypocrisy and call Israel to repentance.

Questions from the Story:

- **How are Zechariah and Elizabeth described in verses 5-6? What does their character reveal about the kind of people God chooses for His purposes?**
- **What personal struggle did Zechariah and Elizabeth face despite their faithfulness (v. 7)? How might decades of childlessness have tested their faith?**
- **What special honor did Zechariah receive when serving in the temple (vv. 8-9)? Why was this moment significant in a priest's lifetime?**
- **What was happening outside while Zechariah served inside the temple (v. 10)? How does this connect the private moment with the community's prayers?**
- **Who appeared to Zechariah, and where (v. 11)? What was Zechariah's immediate reaction (v. 12)?**
- **What did the angel tell Zechariah about his prayer (v. 13)? Which prayer do you think Gabriel was referring to—personal prayers for a child, or priestly prayers for the Messiah's coming?**
- **What specific details did the angel give about the promised son (vv. 13-17)? What do these details reveal about John's identity and mission?**
- **What does the phrase "he will be great in the sight of the Lord" (v. 15) emphasize about how God measures greatness?**
- **How is John's mission described in verse 17? What Old Testament prophecy does this fulfill (Malachi 4:5-6)?**
- **How did Zechariah respond to Gabriel's announcement (v. 18)? What does his question reveal about his faith despite his righteous character?**
- **Who does Gabriel reveal himself to be, and what authority does this give his message (v. 19)?**

- **What consequence did Gabriel pronounce on Zechariah, and why (v. 20)? Do you think this was punishment, discipline, or protection?**
- **How did the people outside respond when Zechariah emerged from the temple (vv. 21-22)? What did they conclude had happened?**
- **What happened after Zechariah returned home (v. 24)? How did Elizabeth respond to her conception (v. 25)?**
- **Why do you think Elizabeth secluded herself for five months? What does her statement reveal about her understanding of God's character?**
- **When Mary arrived and greeted Elizabeth, what miraculous sign occurred (v. 41)? What does John's response in the womb reveal about his prophetic calling?**
- **What happened to Elizabeth when the baby leaped (v. 41)? What did she proclaim about Mary and her child (vv. 42-43)?**
- **What does Elizabeth's recognition of Mary as "the mother of my Lord" reveal about her spiritual insight?**
- **What blessing does Elizabeth pronounce on Mary in verse 45? How does this contrast with Zechariah's initial doubt?**
- **When John was born, what did the community celebrate (vv. 57-58)? How did they understand God's work in this birth?**
- **What assumption did the relatives make about the baby's name (v. 59)? Why was naming important in Jewish culture?**
- **How did Elizabeth respond to their assumption (v. 60)? What does her certainty and boldness reveal?**
- **Why did the relatives challenge Elizabeth's choice (v. 61)? What does this show about the pressure to conform to tradition?**
- **What did Zechariah write when asked about the name (v. 63)? What happened immediately after his obedience (v. 64)?**
- **What were Zechariah's first words after nine months of silence (v. 64)? Why is this significant?**
- **How did the community respond to these events (vv. 65-66)? What question did they ask about John's future?**

- What happened to Zechariah before he prophesied (v. 67)? How does this compare to Elizabeth's earlier filling with the Spirit?
- What themes does Zechariah emphasize in his prophecy (vv. 68-75)? How does he connect God's ancient promises to current events?
- What does Zechariah prophesy specifically about his son John (vv. 76-77)? How does this clarify John's mission?
- What beautiful imagery does Zechariah use in verses 78-79 to describe the coming Messiah? What does "the dawn from on high" represent?
- Where did John grow up, and why is this significant (v. 80)? How did the wilderness prepare him for his future ministry?
- Why do you think God chose to break 400 years of silence with the announcement of John the Baptist rather than Jesus directly?
- What does this story teach us about how God uses our seasons of waiting and unanswered prayer to prepare us for His purposes?
- How does Zechariah's doubt—despite being righteous and standing in God's presence—encourage us when we struggle with faith?
- What does the contrast between Zechariah's doubt and Elizabeth's faith teach us about different responses to God's promises?
- How does John leaping in the womb demonstrate that God can use anyone, at any stage of life, to accomplish His purposes?
- What does it mean to be a "forerunner" in our own lives? How are we called to prepare the way for others to encounter Jesus?
- How does Zechariah's nine months of silence challenge our understanding of God's discipline? In what ways might silence be a gift rather than a punishment?
- What does the naming controversy teach us about the cost of obedience when it conflicts with cultural expectations or family traditions?
- How does this passage challenge our definition of "greatness"? What does it mean to be "great in the sight of the Lord" rather than in human eyes?
- In what ways does this story demonstrate that God's interruptions—though unexpected and even uncomfortable—are invitations into His greater purposes?

- **How should knowing that God sees our disgrace and faithfully removes our shame (v. 25) affect the way we view our own struggles and suffering?**
- **What does Zechariah's immediate turn to praise and prophecy (rather than explanation or defense) teach us about our first response when God moves in our lives?**