

**January 5, 2014**

New Beginnings: My words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time.

Luke 1:5-27a

**5** When Herod was king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah. He was a member of the priestly order of Abijah, and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. **6** Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. **7** They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old.

**8** One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. **9** As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. **10** While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying.

**11** While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. **12** Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. **13** But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. **14** You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, **15** for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. **16** And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. **17** He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly."

**18** Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years."

**19** Then the angel said, "I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news! **20** But now, since you didn't believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time."

**21** Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary, wondering why he was taking so long. **22** When he finally did come out, he couldn't speak to them. Then they realized from his gestures and his silence that he must have seen a vision in the sanctuary.

**23** When Zechariah's week of service in the Temple was over, he returned home. **24** Soon afterward his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months. **25** "How kind the Lord is!" she exclaimed. "He has taken away my disgrace of having no children."

**26** In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, **27** to a virgin named Mary.

It's a new year, and another opportunity for a new beginning. Our scripture today is a birth announcement for John the Baptist. He would be likened to the OT prophets, but he would come to prepare the way for a new testament. He would be the forerunner of Christ as foretold in the OT.

Isaiah 40:3

Listen! It's the voice of someone shouting,  
"Clear the way through the wilderness  
for the LORD!  
Make a straight highway through the wasteland  
for our God!

Matthew tells us that (Matthew 3:3a)  
The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John...

Malachi 3:1 (is another prophecy about John)

"Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

One day John's father, Zechariah who was a priest was serving God in the Temple. While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel appeared to him and told him, "God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John."

Put self in Zech's sandals for a moment. He marries Elizabeth and they plan on a big family; for the society they lived in believed children were a blessing from God the more children you have, meant the more you had God's blessing. But no children are born to them. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth pray for many years, but no children. And at some point they must have become too old to hope and pray for children any longer.

Were they angry at God and bitter? Or did they put up a good front before others at the temple to make them appear more spiritual than they were? You know, saying, "Well, God has given and God has taken away, praise the name of the Lord." Yet in reality they were depressed and just going through the motions of being a priest and a priest's wife, but really not close to God at all.

Or ... did they actually get to a place where they were able to work through their disappointment, accept their situation, and continue to love and serve God with a pure heart? Even though they couldn't understand why He had not answered their prayer, they accepted His will and trusted that He knew what was best for them.

It seems this is the case for it says (in v6-7)

“Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. (Though) They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive.”

We all face situations in our lives that our faith has to work through. As a matter of fact, if we are going to grow in our faith in 2014 this is the way God will accomplish that – bringing us through difficult situations.

My parents worked in St. Kitts for a few years back in the late 70's. My mom, always the adventurous one, took a long walk one day and it started to get late. She didn't have time to walk back the way she came and get back home before it got dark.

She met a man on the beach and asked him if there was a short cut. He said, “Yes, through there” and pointed to a jungle that was in front of her. He told her not to worry that he would lead the way with a machete. There was no way to walk around it or climb over it and so my mom followed the man into the jungle. It was a difficult journey, she did not know where she was or where the guide was taking her, and even questioned if her guide could get her through and when she would finally arrive at her destination. Sometimes she felt stuck, but pressed on, and eventually she made it through. Of course when she told my father the story he was not happy to hear that she walked through a jungle, with a strange man with a machete. But it turned out the guide got her safely through, and she could trust him. And it was a loving reunion with my dad when mom got through the jungle.

At some point in our spiritual journey we will confront a similar situation. We will come across a dark jungle, a wall or as it has been called “a dark night of the soul” that we will have to work through. We will not be able to walk around it or climb over it, we will have to work through it. And if we don't we will get stuck. Many Christians are stuck, no longer moving forward with God's purpose for their life. Don't get stuck, don't stagnate. God will be our guide and help us through if we will trust Him and see the big picture of how He wants to transform us at that wall we face. Our growth as followers of Christ requires that we work through it.

Often these times come through a crisis that turns our world upside down. Times like I'm sure Zechariah and Elizabeth faced when they wondered why God wasn't answering their prayer. We don't know where God is or what God is doing, or where He is going or when it will be over.

And these are not one time events, but something we return to as part of our ongoing relationship with God. But when we make it through we learn as the apostle Paul said,

Philippians 4:12 NIV

“... the secret of being content in any and every situation.”

When we make it through, we find a loving union with God. When we make it through we discover that we have learned to trust, to wait, and to be free of things that really aren't important.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had probably stopped praying and hoping for a child. After all wasn't it impossible to have a baby at their age? Yet, God was answering their prayer at the proper time, God's time. This was the promise from the angel, Gabriel (vv13-15a) But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord.”

Zechariah didn't believe him and was told that because he didn't believe he would not be able to speak until the child was born. Do you think this is harsh, but how could he not believe, he's talking to an angel (v19, 20b):

"I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news! ... my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time."

Sometimes we need to accept God's will, trust Him and serve Him believing that He knows best. But sometimes God is going to answer prayer that you have long stopped praying because it appears to be impossible, yet nothing is impossible with God.

God waited for this timing, God had a plan all along. You have had to wait but now is God's proper time.

Zechariah and Elizabeth didn't know it, but God had a plan and it included them. Their son, John would announce the coming of the Savior. God's purpose, planning and preparation includes us.

Acts 17:26 NIV

(God) determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

God wanted you to exist. You are part of His plan. God reveals His plan to us over the course of time, revealing our part in His plan.

Like Zechariah we may be afraid that God's promise will not happen, but God proves His faithfulness at the "proper" perfect time. May we trust Him, even when we don't know where He is going. Surrender to Him, you can trust Him.

There is an old story about a wise man living on one of China's vast frontiers. One day, for no apparent reason, a young man's horse ran away and was taken by nomads across the border. Everyone tried to offer consolation for the man's bad fortune, but his father, a wise man, said, "What makes you so sure this not a blessing?"

Months later, his horse returned, bringing with her a magnificent stallion. This time everyone was full of congratulations for the son's good fortune. But now his father said, "What makes you so sure this isn't a disaster?"

Their household was made richer by this fine horse the son loved to ride. But one day he fell off his horse and broke his hip. Once again, everyone offered their consolation for his bad luck, but the father said, "What makes you so sure this is not a blessing?"

A year later nomads invaded across the border, and every able-bodied man was required to take up his bow and go into battle. The Chinese families living on the border lost nine of every ten men. Only because the son was lame did father and son survive to take care of each other.

Often, what appears like a blessing and success is actually a terrible thing; what appears to be a terrible event turns out to be a rich blessing.

On New Year's Eve, Annette Neff, facing chemo therapy, wrote this:

Can't wait to ring in 2014! Looking forward to getting my journey started. Facing my next 7 months with all the strength and grace I have. I'm eagerly anticipating seeing what I will learn and how I will grow during my journey. I know there's a plan and a message and something good will come out of this!