

November 27, 2016  
The Call of Christmas  
First Sunday of Advent: "Zechariah: A Call to Prepare"  
Luke 1:1-25

When Zechariah, the aging priest in the video, went to work that day, he did not expect to encounter an angel. He had been a priest for decades and served faithfully in his priestly responsibilities for as long as he could remember. However, **God regularly works through ordinary people doing what they normally do in their life.**

From the first chapters of Genesis in the Garden of Eden to the final descriptions in Revelation and all throughout the pages of the Bible, there are hundreds of references where the activities of angels are recorded. As we consider the subject of angels, let's remember what the writer of Hebrews stated.

**Hebrews 13:2**

**Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!**

In other words, you may have been visited by an angel and you didn't even know it! So be nice and hospitable to all and take the advice we sing at Christmas time: **"So be good for goodness sake!"** Speaking of Christmas songs, it would not be Christmas without singing songs that speak of angels and their activity such as Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, Angels We Have Heard On High, and Angels from the Realms of Glory just to name a few.

**In his book, Angels: God's Secret Agents, Billy Graham says,** "I believe in angels because the Bible says there are angels; and I believe the Bible to be the true Word of God." He goes on to write about how "the Bible testifies that God has provided assistance for us in our spiritual conflicts. We are not alone in this world! The Bible teaches us that God's Holy Spirit has been given to empower us and guide us. Also, the Bible – in nearly three hundred different places – also teaches that God has countless angels at His command. Furthermore, God has commissioned these angels to aid His children in their struggles against Satan....If the activities of the devil and his demons seem to be intensifying in these days, as I believe they are, should not the incredibly greater supernatural powers of God's holy angels be even more indelibly impressed on the minds of people of faith?...After all, references to the holy angels in the Bible far outnumber references to Satan and his subordinate demon. If you are a believer, expect mighty angels to accompany you in your life experiences...I also believe in angels because I have sensed their presence in my life on special occasions."

Without question, Zechariah, the priest, sensed the presence of an angel in his life on one special occasion that is recorded in the Bible. He was just doing his job, and the divinely orchestrated encounter with the angel took place in the stillness of his workday when he least expected it. He received the Call of Christmas. It would be a Call to Prepare.

The Call of Christmas certainly comes from angelic messengers sent directly by the Lord God Almighty who play a prominent role in the advent of the Messiah. In this series, we will examine four calls that come forth from the angels. The Gospel of Matthew records the Call of Christmas from the angel that came to Joseph. The other three calls are recorded in the Gospel of Luke that begin with Zechariah, then moves to Mary and ultimately to the shepherds who were out in the fields surrounding Bethlehem watching their flocks by night. All four instances recount an angelic call that would lead to the arrival of the Christ-child.

The first Call of Christmas is a Call to Prepare. Our story begins in Luke 1:1. As we move through the passage today (vv1-25), we will gather some insight to help give understanding to what is unfolding in the story that will prepare the way for Christmas. Let's begin by looking at the first four verses together.

Luke 1:1-4

Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used the eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples. Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write a careful account for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught.

Why is this intro so important and what does it mean to our primary subject of exploring the angelic call that helps prepare us for Christmas?

Luke's first volume as well as his second volume, known as Acts was written to his friend named Theophilus. We know very little about Theophilus other than that he is referred to as "most excellent. Some suggest this was a title of an important Roman official who was learning about Jesus." We don't know specifics about Theophilus other than Luke was writing a well-researched account of the story of Jesus for his friend, as well as any others who likely would read the story.

Luke opens his gospel basically saying; Here is something you can trust. Readers would know they were beginning a serious, well-researched piece of work. Luke's writing would hold up due to his thorough research, sources that could be checked.

In biblical days, they did not have printed newspapers or books or media outlets such as television, radio or the internet to share stories. Instead, the people relied upon official storytellers. Whenever an event took place that got the people talking such as an earthquake, a battle or a visit by a royal person, the story quickly would spread around the village and settle into an agreed upon form. While everyone would know the story, some had a gift of being able to tell the story better and more accurately than others. Everyone in town knew who the recognized storyteller was and thus gave that person the final say to communicate it the best.

Once the story was set, there were no modifications or licenses to elaborate or fudge on details. Because the rest of the people knew the story so well, if a storyteller went off script, the crowd quickly would correct him. For a modern example, at this time of year, many people read 'Twas the Night Before Christmas. It is not a new story. It is an old story that everybody knows how it goes and how the story rhymes and flows to the very end. Some may know the story so well they do not even need to read it off the page. Imagine the official storyteller of the family beginning the story like this:

"'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house. Not a creature was stirring except for a mouse."

Immediately the people listening to the story would stop the storyteller and say: "Wait. Stop. That's not how the story goes. You said not a creature was stirring EXCEPT for a mouse. The story goes like this: not a creature was stirring...NOT EVEN a mouse. Come on, get it right! Now start over!"

In Luke's day, everybody in the crowd would know the story just as well as the official story teller. If there were any details that were embellished or out of sorts, the crowd, and the story teller who would have told Luke the accounts of the stories concerning Jesus' life, would have corrected anything in his letter that was written down as an official account. The reason this is so important is that as we continue reading Luke's story of the arrival of the Christ-child before we get to his birth, we encounter an angel in the story.

Within the first couple of paragraphs of the story, Luke brings an angel into the narrative. He does the same thing in his second letter to Theophilus in Acts. Within the first scenes in both letters Luke introduces us to angelic activity. What is important for us to consider is that nobody blinked at the mention of the angel. In other words, angels were believed to be real, credible and a part of historical accounts that the masses would have accepted as fact. There is no reason we should not do the same today!

With that context, let's keep moving through the story and get to the angel's Call to Prepare.

#### Luke 1:5-10

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. Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old.

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

This portion of the story introduces us to a faithful couple in ministry who loved God and lived lives of integrity and honor before the Lord. However, there was deep sadness in their hearts and judgmental eyes from all who looked on their **lives because they did not have any children.** In that day, not having children was viewed as a curse from God because of some sin in a person's life or past. But that was not the case. Their time to have children had not yet come even though they were past the traditional childbearing and child-rearing years. They had prayed their whole marriage for a child as all Jewish couples would have done. Every Jewish woman dreamed of having the blessing and honor not only of having a child but also of possibly being chosen to carry and give birth to the long-awaited Messiah.

That dream was long gone for Zechariah and Elizabeth. Nevertheless, they continued to pray and live faithfully before God in their lives. As a priest, Zechariah would invest 50 weeks of the year at his home town teaching and serving in his local synagogue. However, two weeks out of the year he and all other priests who were a part of his division of Abijah would head to Jerusalem to serve within the temple area and perform various priestly duties. There were 24 different priestly divisions in biblical days. Each division consisted of hundreds of priests to help with the various responsibilities that were needed both in their hometowns as well as at the temple in Jerusalem. Throughout the year there was a rotation that enabled each of the 24 divisions of priests to serve two-one week terms that enabled a fair share of the work load in Jerusalem at the temple to be done with equitable sharing.

During the time of service in Jerusalem, one of the more noble duties that occurred twice a day, morning and late afternoon, was the burning of incense on the altar inside the Holy Place of the temple. The way such a responsibility was assigned was by a method known as casting of lots. Think in terms of drawing a name out of a hat. Zechariah was selected for a literal once in a lifetime opportunity to preside over this holy, priestly duty - the burning of incense by the priests. This duty even tied back to the Ark of the Covenant and how God would meet with his people in that day of their ancient ancestors of the faith. (Moses wrote of this in Exodus 30: 1-10)

As Zechariah was chosen to experience the culmination of his life's training and priesthood responsibilities, verses 11 and following unfold what happened on this unique day when the Call of Christmas would come to Zechariah after the prayers that were prayed. Zechariah was about to encounter the angel and be given the Call to Prepare.

#### **Luke 1:11-20**

**While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. 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. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God.**

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."

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."

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! 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."

Zechariah was so overcome in this angelic encounter; it likely took his breath away. His emotions raced as he tried to understand what the angel was calling him toward. How could he be a part of receiving a call to prepare the way for the arrival of the Messiah when he and his wife were so far past the season for being parents? At this point the angel asserts himself and shares not only his name, Gabriel but also a sign of his power that would limit Zechariah's speech until after John would be born.

Billy Graham goes on to write about the importance of Gabriel and his ministry with great insight. He says, "Gabriel is primarily God's messenger of mercy and promise. He appears four times in the Bible, always bearing good news (Daniel 8:16, 9:21, Luke 1:9, 26)... the announcements of Gabriel in unfolding the plans, purposes, and verdicts of God are of monumental importance."

Graham goes on to write, "Gabriel first appears in the New Testament in Luke 1. He identifies himself to Zachariah, announces the birth of John the Baptist, and describes his life and ministry as the forerunner of Jesus."

In other words, the Call of Christmas from Gabriel to Zechariah is a Call to Prepare the way of the Messiah and his upcoming arrival. The birth of John the Baptist dynamically was connected with the Call of Christmas that embodied the good news of God's salvation in Jesus Christ.

When Gabriel appeared to Zechariah to announce the good news that Elizabeth would, despite her age, give birth to a son, his words were immersed in the good news. Gabriel communicated the Call to Prepare as he predicted John's ministry recorded in verses 16-18.

Luke 1:16-18

And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. 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."

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."

The Call of Christmas to Zechariah was all about preparation. And now he could not speak.

Luke 1:21-22

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary, wondering why he was taking so long. 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.

Perhaps Zechariah was good at the game charades. Just try and communicate to your family and friends by waving your hands and arms around that an angel met you in the temple as you were making the incense offering on the altar. (Any volunteers want to come up and try?)

By now this Call of Christmas had been received. The buzz around the temple surely made its way through the streets of Jerusalem and beyond as storytellers heard and retold the story of the angel who encountered Zechariah, the old priest. Now it was time to go home and begin the preparation for John's arrival.

Luke 1:23-25

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

This Call of Christmas could not have happened to a more deserving couple. In a quiet moment of his job, an angel appeared during Zechariah's workday in the temple and speaks his message from God. These were ordinary people doing their ordinary jobs in their ordinary lives and being faithful to God and one another through it all. As N.T. Wright notes, "The story is about much more than Zechariah's joy of having a son at last or Elizabeth's exultation of being freed from the scorn of the mother's in the village. It is about the great fulfillment of God's promises and purposes. But the needs, hopes and fears of ordinary people are not forgotten in this larger story, precisely because of who Israel's God is – the God of lavish, self-giving love...When God acts on the large scale, he takes care of smaller human concerns as well."

As we prepare our homes, church, communities and workplaces for Christmas, may we invest time preparing our hearts for the Advent of the King. Trimming the tree, stringing lights on the house, hanging the wreaths, lighting the candles, cooking the Christmas foods, singing the Christmas carols and enjoying the festivities of the season are preparations that are meant to be savored. But preparing our hearts to encounter the Savior is something that is meant to be life-changing both for our neighbors and us. It's the Call of Christmas.

It's a Call to Prepare just as the angel said. How do you need to respond to this Call to Prepare during the Christmas season?