

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday in Advent, December 2, 2012

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 55, 58:1, 64, 75, 61:1-2.

Lessons: Malachi 4:1-6, 2 Peter 1:2-11, Luke 3:1-20.

Sermon Text: Luke 1:1-25.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltritt

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

If advertisers and businesses have had their way with us, we have been immersed in preparations for Christmas for weeks now.

But because we are God's beloved children, let's refocus – at the very least for a short while this morning – on really God-pleasing, appropriate preparation for Christmas. After all, Christmas is the time we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, our Savior, who was sent as the Savior for all mankind.

Luke begins his gospel with the history of a man who is the specific, chosen forerunner to prepare people for the imminent birth of Jesus Christ. In this Gospel, Luke begins before Jesus' birth in order to show us God's immediate preparations for this birth of this only-begotten Son, something God had been promising for centuries through his prophets and priests. Today let us remember

THE PROMISE OF THE COMING BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

- 1. This special child was promised to a priest and his wife who had no children.**
- 2. His father, however, didn't believe the great promise the angel Gabriel made about the son to be born to them.**

Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed earnestly to the Lord that he would grant them a child. However, Elizabeth had reached the age in her life when women normally no longer conceive and bear children. So when the Angel Gabriel announces to Zechariah that he would father a child, this old man is dumbfounded – and he does not believe. As a chastisement from God Zechariah is unable to speak for the entire nine months of pregnancy of his wife.

“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.” This is told us in order that the miracle which follows may show the power of God. Even from the very beginning of the New Testament, the gospel should prove that its contents are miraculous. Its facts reach far beyond ordinary limitations and do not depend upon the will and strength of the flesh but upon God's supernatural and miraculous might.

In Israel it was considered a dishonor and some kind of punishment from the Lord when a married woman had no children. But Scripture says that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous. They showed the fruits of faith in their lives. To serve and obey God's will was their greatest desire. This is the way their righteousness was revealed.

Zechariah was serving his turn as priest in the temple when the angel Gabriel appeared to him. God's great priest Aaron had 24 grandsons. One was named Abijah. Zechariah's son was born from this priestly family. His mother was also born into a family of priests. As a hereditary priest, he would have grown up very conscious of the requirements of the law. In God's plan of salvation John was the person whom God had chosen to serve as the forerunner of the Savior.

It was by the casting of lots that it was determined which priest of the order should enter the temple. This was done so that nothing in the sanctuary should be left to human choice. God himself would choose who was to serve in the holy place. According to Jewish tradition, no priest who had already officiated was permitted to participate again in the service in the same seven day time frame. God had commanded that incense was to be burned every morning and evening when the priest entered the temple of the Lord. The people offered prayers outside the temple three times each day, morning noon and evening. The first and last public prayer was at the same time as the offering of incense. By a blast of trumpets from the temple, times were proclaimed when the priest was ready to enter with the incense. The entrance was from the east. As the priest approached, the altar was in front of him. At the right of the altar toward the north stood the table with the showbread, and to the left toward the south was the seven-armed golden candle-stick. But that day Zechariah saw something strange. On the right side, between the altar and the table for the showbread an angel of the Lord appeared.

Zechariah realized immediately that the stranger was an angel, and a great fear came upon him. He knew that he was a sinner and lived among sinners. But the angel immediately dispels his fear so that Zechariah may be prepared for the message he is about to deliver. ***“Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.”***

Had Zechariah been praying publicly in the temple for a child? It would not seem likely because a priest in the temple would bring the needs of the people to the Lord in prayer rather than his personal supplications. It is most likely that Zechariah prayed for the fulfillment of the promises which God had made to his chosen people and for the help that was to come out of Zion for all mankind, the revelation of the Redeemer.

The angel tells him: ***“Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.”***

Of course, when a son is promised to Zechariah by the angel, this promise is definitely related to the fulfillment of the coming of the Savior. The promise of the forerunner was in part an answer to the prayer for the coming Redeemer.

The shadow of the things to come is about to disappear before the real thing, which is Christ. It is in the Temple in Jerusalem that this first proclamation is made. This is especially significant, because the old era – the Old Testament – is here joined with the new era – the New Testament – and this happens in the holy sanctuary of the Lord.

The Angel Gabriel describes the special role this son is to fulfill: he will be a joy and delight to his parents ***“and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.”*** Many of the people of Israel he will bring back to the Lord God.

The Hebrew name John means “Jehovah is gracious” or “The Lord has shown favor”. John would be like the great Old Testament prophet Elijah. His calling was to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

A new day of God’s grace is coming and John will testify to the grace that the Messiah will bring. Many will rejoice at his birth, including Zechariah himself, finding that his son John will point people to the source of true joy. The angel states further that John would be an outstanding character in the history of the gospel. He promises that this child ***“will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*** It will be John’s preaching of repentance – showing the peoples’ sinfulness and their need to turn from their sins and turn to God for forgiveness – that will bring many to faith in the coming Savior.

Jesus says of him in Matthew 11:11: ***“I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”***

He should not drink wine or strong drink. This is something which John himself would do. Then you see the preparation the Lord is making. John shall be filled with the Holy Ghost from the very first – even before he was born. When Mary the mother of Jesus came to visit her relative Elizabeth, John leaped in his mother’s womb! In later life he would receive an even greater measure of the Holy Spirit as he preached repentance before the coming of the Savior. His entire life and personality shall be consecrated to the Lord from the beginning.

John shall be a new Elijah. He shall go forth in the spirit and power of Elijah. His mission will be to ***“turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of [God] – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”***

Zechariah should have received the glad tidings with faith, not in unbelief. To greet the message of grace with the spirit of unbelief is a terrible sin. ***“Zechariah asked the angel, ‘How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.’”*** The message from the angel is so overwhelming that the faith of Zechariah proves inadequate. He is unable to accept the word of the angel without a sign that makes sense to him. So in his unbelief he asks for a sign. How often don't we, in our unbelief and rebellion wish that the Lord would make things plainer or clearer for us, as with some kind of sign? But the Lord God has given us his holy Word, the Bible, which we are to search, to ransack for answers to things that trouble us. We must look at the example of Zechariah to be warned not to seek signs from God which he does not give us.

“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 able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.’” Gabriel is the only angel who is named in the canonical books of the Bible except for the angel Michael. The name Gabriel signifies “the man of God” or “God's mighty hero.” This angel stands in the very presence of God, which shows his position as a servant, a servant willing to obey the Lord God.

“The fullness of the time” (Galatians 4:4) has now come.

Zechariah then receives the sign, a sign which includes the chastisement for his sin. If we think of another aged couple to whom God promised a son, we think that Abraham and Sarah were disciplined far less severely. But remember that Zechariah was a priest, well-informed of God's mighty deeds in the old covenant. It is easy to expect that Zechariah, because of his closeness to the Word of God, should have more willingly accepted the promise and the word of the angel. Jesus himself said ***“But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”*** (Luke 12:48)

When Zechariah came from the Temple, after a long wait on the part of the people, they soon realized that he had lost his ability to speak and that something extraordinary had happened in the sanctuary. It was the custom, when the priest appeared before the people assembled outside the temple, that a benediction was pronounced, the very benediction that you hear at the end of our worship service. But Zechariah was unable to speak such a blessing and was forced to make use of some kind of sign language to try to explain what had happened. He had received his sign. Now he has abundant time – up to nine months without being able to say a word – to reflect upon all that had happened in the Temple.

Zechariah would remain in silence until the baby was born. ***“After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ‘The Lord has done this for me,’ she said. ‘In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.’”*** The reproach no longer rested upon Elizabeth but she prefers to remain in seclusion before God, to praise him who had revealed his grace, and thus avoid even the appearance of vanity over the great joy that had come into her heart. She sought to quietly reflect upon this blessing. When she saw that she had conceived, she hid herself five months, realizing privately in thanksgiving that the Lord had looked on her and had taken away her dishonor among men. In Israel it was a special blessing for a married woman to become a mother. Here is a mother-to-be who truly anticipates the birth of her child as a blessed gift of the Lord!

And so in this promise of the birth of John the Baptist, we see God's promises plainly revealed. We see how man's sin gets in the way of believing such promises from God. And today we ask God ***“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”*** (Mark 9:24) Lord, let us see you and your faithful promises in all your words! Amen.