

Title: Reveal**[Slide 1]****Text: Luke 1:5-25****Waiting for Redemption****The old folks:**

Luke begins the Christmas Story in a most unusual way, by introducing us to two old folks: Zechariah, the priest, and his wife Elizabeth. The two of them are an exemplary Jewish couple: "righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly." (Luke 1:6 NIV) The only fly in the ointment is the fact that they have never had any children. And to be childless in ancient Jewish society was a lifelong curse. It would be assumed that *something* was wrong with you and God was punishing you for it.

Israel in microcosm:

Zechariah's and Elizabeth's inability to have a child was a picture of Israel in microcosm. The Jewish people of that time had much to be thankful for: they had returned from captivity in foreign lands, they had rebuilt Jerusalem, King Herod had completely renovated and expanded the Temple. But something was missing: God had not yet returned to dwell with His people and set them free from foreign domination. Instead, Roman armies marched in their streets, a Roman governor ruled with an iron fist, tax monies went to support pagan regimes, and if you took a stand against the Empire, you ended up on a Roman cross.

In other words, the Jewish people saw themselves as still being in exile – exiles within their own homeland! Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, many of them did their best to follow all of God's commands as laid out in the Torah. They faithfully observed Sabbath and strict dietary laws. They circumcised their male children on the 8th day. They made pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times each year.

But nothing changed. Their hopes were as barren and frustrated as the old couple that couldn't have any children.

Waiting for redemption:

Last week we read the song of the redeemed as they gathered to give thanks:

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Psalm 107:2-3 NIV

*Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story—
those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,
those he gathered from the lands,
from east and west, from north and south.*

But for Zechariah, Elizabeth and their compatriots the story was unfinished. They were still waiting for redemption. They longed for the day when the prophet Malachi's words would come true:

[Slide 3]

Malachi 3:1 NIV

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

They were waiting for redemption.

God's messenger

An answered prayer:

The action begins with Zechariah fulfilling a lifelong dream. He has been chosen to go into the Temple building itself to burn incense at the hour of afternoon prayer. While he prays, a large crowd of worshipers waits for him to come out of the Temple and speak the priestly blessing.

Then, all of a sudden he discovers that he is not alone in the Temple:

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Luke 1:11-12 NIV

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

But the angel has good news for him and his wife:

[Slide 5]

Luke 1:13 NIV

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John."

Their lifelong prayer is going to be answered! Elizabeth's shame and self-reproach will be replaced by the joy of the Lord.

Little does Zechariah know at the time, but this wonderful blessing is just the tip of the iceberg!

A bigger blessing:

The angel goes on to say that the child to be born will bless his entire community:

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Luke 1:14 NIV

He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,

The joy at the arrival of this miracle baby will extend across the land. God is doing something new and wonderful – much bigger than blessing two old folks!

God's messenger:

But the biggest blessing is yet to come:

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Luke 1:15-17 NIV

"...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 before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel 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 parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

This little boy will not just light up the home of two old folks. He will not just be an unexpected blessing to a village or extended family. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit and become the Elijah figure who prepares God's people for the coming of the Lord Himself.

Malachi had promised:

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Malachi 4:5-6 NIV

"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."

Now that great promise is coming to pass. This child will lead a vast reform movement that reverses the sin and curse that has hung over the land. Only then will the LORD come.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had asked for something big in their eyes, something that now seemed impossible. But God had bigger plans. They would have a son, and that son would usher in the Messiah Himself.

Reveal**Stuck on Square One!**

Poor Zechariah! He's still back on Square One, trying to figure out how he and Elizabeth could ever have a child at their age. All he can say is:

[Slide 9]*Luke 1:18 NIV**"How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."*

He hasn't evidently heard anything else that the angel said to him.

Isn't that the way it is with all of us from time to time? We get so focused on one thing that we can't see the bigger picture. I remember when Suzanne was pregnant with our first child and in danger of losing the baby, all I could do was ask God to save that little unborn life. That was the biggest thing on my spiritual radar. I didn't have the slightest clue that one day she would grow up to be the mom of three wonderful young men. All I could hope for was a healthy little baby. Who knows what impact they will have on their generation?

God always has a bigger plan than anything we can imagine! He starts with us where we are, and takes us on a faith journey beyond our wildest dreams.

Gabriel:

The angel doesn't bother to answer Zechariah's question. Instead, he identifies himself and his heavenly rank:

[Slide 10]*Luke 1:19-20 NIV**The angel said to him, "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 appointed time."*

To Zechariah an angel named Gabriel could mean only one thing. You see, in Zechariah's time the #Best Seller for books of the Bible was the Book of Daniel. The angel Gabriel had appeared to Daniel, and brought the good news that God had heard his prayers for Israel and was now going to reveal when Israel's long exile would end. Jewish scholars studied Daniel to try and crack the code, as it were, so that they could know when God would come and set them free.

But now, in the most unexpected way imaginable, Gabriel had returned to tell an old man that his elderly wife would bear the long awaited Elijah figure who would prepare the way for Messiah!

And because Zechariah had failed to believe this bigger message, he would now be unable to speak until the child was born. There would be no priestly blessing today for the assembled crowd outside the Temple. Zechariah could only try to make hand signals! The age of exile was coming to an end. The new blessings would be spoken by none other than God's own Son.

Reveal:

So what does God want to reveal to you? Would you allow Him to help you "zoom out" from your focus on a particular thing so that He could show you a glimpse of the bigger purpose He is working out in your life? Paul tells us:

Romans 8:28 NIV

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had been "called according to his purpose." So are you. If God could turn the world upside down through an old couple, He can give you a redemption story in your life and in your time. So, keep praying. He is working for the good because He loves you!