

# Sermon: Zechariah and Elisabeth, the parents

## Luke 1:1-25

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How to prepare for meeting with God? That is the question of the period of Advent.  
How can we prepare for meeting with Him, when he comes in glory?  
And how to prepare for meeting him today, in our daily life?

Today and in the weeks ahead we will look especially at the person of John the Baptist. He was called to prepare Israel for the coming of Jesus Christ. He can teach us how we can be ready for meeting with God.

Luke wrote his Gospel to someone called Theophilus; that name means 'Lover of God'. If we love God, Luke's Gospel has a message for us as well.

### 1. Trust the Word

Before we go straight to John the Baptist, today we look at his parents Zacharia and Elisabeth. But before that, we must pay attention to how Luke introduces the Gospel that he wrote.

Nowadays we often meet with people who consider the Christmas stories as nothing but sweet fables. Just as in the days of Luke there were also many skeptics.

No wonder. We hear of angels, of an old man and his old wife becoming parents, we hear of Mary who became pregnant as a virgin. These are not your everyday stories, are they?

But Luke makes clear - you better believe it really happened. In the first few verses of the Gospel he clarifies where he got his stories from: from the eyewitnesses themselves. From the people who saw, and heard, and experienced the events first-hand.

Luke was a companion of Paul on some of his missionary trips, and with Paul he probably met many people who were firsthand eyewitnesses. He also had access to many written eyewitness accounts, and all this he used for writing an orderly account for Theophilus.

Luke acted as any normal historian today would; he used trustworthy sources to describe what had happened. He offers us a careful construction of what happened around the birth of Jesus Christ, and of what happened shortly before that, and when we hear of angels, and virgin birth and about the miraculous birth of John, we better believe it. Eyewitnesses testify to it.

Luke writes, in the first verse, of the "things that have been fulfilled among us". Those are words to consider well. He wrote about events that had their beginnings earlier, but now they were fulfilled.

God was working in the normal history of humankind, he worked throughout time, but now the work of God had to come to fruition. And Luke says specifically that these things were fulfilled 'among us', that is, in the midst of us, humans.

The Gospel is not some mythology, not a story of 'once upon a time', high in the clouds. It is about God using human history, becoming part of that history, God being among us.

It is comforting for us to know that history - including the story of our own lives - is the fulfillment of God's plans. That is not always easy to see, but you can be sure of it. Because God did come into our time and space.

## 2. Zechariah and Elisabeth

Zachariah and Elisabeth experienced this in a very tangible manner. It seemed God had been silent in their lives. He had not answered their million prayers for a child and they suffered for this.

And then the angel Gabriel visited Zachariah to tell him that his barren wife would become pregnant. If Luke had not thoroughly done his research, we might find it hard to believe, but it really happened.

Zachariah was a priest from the division of Abijah. The tribe of Aaron was divided into 24 subtribes, and each subtribe served two weeks of the year in the temple.

And now was the turn of the subtribe of Abijah, and Zachariah was very lucky. Each day two priests were chosen by the lot to sacrifice the incense on the golden incense altar in the temple. And Zachariah was one of them.

One priest was chosen for the early morning sacrifice, and Zachariah was chosen for the afternoon sacrifice of 3pm.

Zachariah was worshipfully praying to God, burning the incense in accordance with the law.

This altar for the incense stood right in front of the curtain, the veil, that blocked the access to the Holiest Place with the ark of the covenant. Angels were embroidered on this curtain, as a reminder of the angels who worship and serve God in his heavenly temple.

Then one of these real angels, Gabriel, appeared to announce that Zachariah and Elisabeth would have a son, even in their old age. "Your prayer has been heard", Zachariah, "and your wife Elisabeth will bear you a son."

Your prayer has been heard? I assume that Zachariah and his wife had stopped praying this prayer long ago, decades ago... I mean, when you become old, you stop expecting that God will give you a child. So you stop praying.

I am sure you have certain prayers that you prayed long ago, but after a while, you gave up. It seemed so useless.

But you know what? In the book of Revelation 5:6-8, where we get a view into the heavenly temple of God, we read this - and I summarize a bit:

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, [Jesus Christ, that is] encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. [They] fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

In the heavenly temple, like in the Jerusalem Temple, we see incense being burned, and it represents the prayers of the saints. It is as if all of our prayers are taken together, they are bundled, and they go up to God as fragrant worship for him.

All your prayers are heard; God may not answer them all, but they all go up to him as something that is pleasing to Him. And some prayers are answered when you even forgot that you prayed them, as Zachariah experienced.

So when you pray, do not give up. Your prayers - whatever you ask of God - are in the first place like a pleasing fragrance for God.

Being worshipful in the presence of God is comforting in itself. But God also listens, and answers. Though often not in ways that we hope for.

Imagine Zachariah and Elisabeth. They live in hard days, the days of King Herod. He was a truly wicked irreligious king of Juda, and not even a Jew himself. What a contrast with this old couple. They "were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord." (Luke 1:6)

But this childlessness was really a problem for them. They obeyed God, they were good people. And of such people, the law that they loved so much, said, in Deuteronomy 7:14: "There shall not be male or female barren among you..."

Why did God not bless them with children?

The people must have been talking about them. 'Something must be wrong with them. They seem nice enough, but something is not right. Why would God not give them a child?'

When Zachariah went home and made love to Elisabeth, at their old age, she became pregnant. She hid herself for the first five months. Maybe she was an introvert? Maybe she wanted to enjoy this blessing of God alone with Zachariah?

I think she enjoyed the fact that God had looked with favor at her, and she did not want the people who had always whispered about her, to know her secret too soon. In any case, she felt relieved because God took away her "reproach among people".

When things go wrong in your life, people may whisper, accuse, point fingers. But even when people look down on you, God may consider you "righteous and blameless".

Yes you. Righteous and blameless. Not that Zachariah and his wife were without sin. We see how Zachariah for instance did not believe the angel. So they were not perfect people.

But God was very satisfied with them. Surely they did wrong, but then they asked God for forgiveness and then they walked with him again. In the eyes of God they were blameless because they always came back to him after stumbling. They were committed to obeying Him.

### 3. John

I mentioned the evil King Herod; for centuries there had not been a king of the royal family of David on the throne. For many centuries, God had not spoken through his prophets.

And now Zachariah, the man who served as a priest in the temple, was also silenced.

It was as if God stopped speaking, and that He held his breath. Something new was to happen.

But John came first as the conclusion of the old testament.

He came from this perfect priestly family,  
he acted as a prophet,  
he lived by the laws of God.

In John we see the ideal old testament believer. He was perfectly ready to meet with God and with Jesus Christ, and he came to prepare his people for that.

What do we read of him?

He was to bring the people back to God;  
He would help fathers and children to be reconciled and to live together peacefully;  
He would help the disobedient to become just as wise as the righteous people.

That is how we can prepare ourselves for meeting with God.

Obey God, have a healthy family-life, be reconciled with all people.  
Be united with righteous people and live yourself a righteous life.

John was a priest. As a priest he had been trained to slaughter animals in the temple, to reconcile God and men.

But John would point at Jesus, and call him the true Lamb of God. We cannot prepare for meeting with God without also looking at Jesus Christ.

But we focus on John now. He was filled with the Spirit of God, and we read of him also that he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Don't we love spirit and power? What do we think about when we think of spirit and power in regard to Elijah? His amazing miracles, I guess. And the word "spirit and power" seem to almost have been hijacked by pentecostal churches.

But we also need this Spirit and power of God to prepare for his coming. In the life of John, what did these words mean? Amazing miracles were not the hallmark of the ministry of John. His true mark was strong commitment, and stamina.

The spirit and the power of God were at work in Elijah and led to some amazing miracles. The spirit and power of God in John became visible in his 100% commitment to obey God. He would even be killed by the son of king Herod, because as a prophet he told the king that he should change his life.

What do we learn from Zachariah, Elisabeth and John about preparing for meeting with God? What can we learn for our attitude in this period of Advent?

### **Conclusion: seven lessons**

Most of all, we learn from their example of strong commitment. Because commitment was the hallmark of John the Baptist and his parents. Though thick and thin, in good times and bad times - they obeyed their God.

Even in dark days of childlessness, of people pointing fingers at them, Zachariah and Elisabeth served their Lord.

Even in dark days of being imprisoned, John looked at Jesus Christ as his savior.

Even though living in dark days of evil kings - they stuck to their beliefs and their lifestyle - for God alone.

This commitment we need to prepare for meeting with our God.