

December 15, 2013

TEXT: Luke 1:5-20, 46-55

## **The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold**

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup>Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. <sup>7</sup>But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, <sup>9</sup>he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. <sup>10</sup>Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. <sup>11</sup>Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. <sup>13</sup>But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup>You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup>for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>16</sup>He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' <sup>18</sup>Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' <sup>19</sup>The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. <sup>20</sup>But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

## **Mary's Song of Praise**

46 And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
50 His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
51 He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
54 He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

We've just heard two passages from the beginning of Luke's gospel and been introduced to two people who had life-changing encounters with God's messenger, the angel Gabriel. The first was the old priest Zechariah, who was performing his duties in the temple when the angel told him how his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son who would be a mighty prophet like Elijah. Zechariah found this hard to believe and for his hesitancy, he was struck mute. The second was the young girl Mary, who was alone at home when the angel told her that she would bear a son who would be called the Son of the Most High. Mary found this hard to believe, but she offered two responses, saying first "Let it be with me according to your word" and then singing a song of praise about how her soul magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God her Savior.

Karl Barth was a famous theologian in our Reformed Presbyterian tradition. He was a pastor in Switzerland during the years prior to World War II and often preached to people held captive in prison. He wrote volumes and volumes of bible commentary and theology, pushing the church never to forget to look to Christ for all good things rather than simply trusting in their own wisdom and power. And in one of his early sermons, he reflected on poor Zechariah and young, faithful Mary, and offered some of these words about belief.

*We all are just like Zechariah in the temple. Every one of us has a hidden side of our being that is, as it were, in touch with God. We are secretly in a close connection with the eternal truth and love, even if we ourselves are not aware of it. And from this other hidden side of our being resounds a voice that is actually speaking to us constantly...*

*However we may think about it, the living word of God is available to us. It is a word that, in contrast to all human words, is clear, intelligible and unambiguous. Yes, this*

*inward word of God contains precisely that which moves and unsettles us. It is this word that delights and grieves us, and it is something which we would gladly tell one another.*

*Without this word, we would not suffer so deeply from the injustice we must stand by and watch. Without this word we would not be able to resist so powerfully and become so indignant against the lies and violence we see dominating life separated from this word. Were it not for God's voice placed into our heart, we would not have the desire to show love or to become fully loving...*

*Believing in God is not something as special and difficult or even unnatural as we often suppose. Believing means that what we listen to, we listen to as God's speech. What moves us is not just our own concern, but precisely God's concern. What causes me worry, that is God's worry; what gives me joy, that is God's joy; what I hope for is God's hope. In other words, in all that I am, I am only a party to that which God thinks and does. In all that I do, it is not I, but rather God who is important...*

*The greatest, the best in us is precisely not our own private concern, but rather God's. God wants to do everything, certainly through us and with us and never without us; but our participation in what God does must naturally originate and grow out of God's power, not ours.*

*So now here we stand, simultaneously deaf and mute like Zechariah. Yet in spite of his unbelief, Zechariah was still a herald of Advent, one who waited for God. Otherwise the angel would not have spoken with him. Nor would he have become the father of John the Baptist. When everything Zechariah could not believe and could not express finally came to pass, then he was able to believe and speak. For God does not stand still when we come to a standstill, but precedes us with God's deeds and only waits enough so we can follow. And so we accept – even with all that we cannot say and with all that we have not yet heard or understood – that we are all heralds of Advent. [And then, like Mary, we too will rejoice in the Mighty One who has done great things for you and me.]*

From Karl Barth's sermon on "Luke 1:5-23" from *Predigten* 1917, pp. 423-431.