

When God Interrupts: Zechariah Luke 1 (selected verses) 12/13/20

Bonnie and I are part of a small group that meets each week for Bible study, sharing, and prayer. Since last March, we've been meeting via Zoom. We recently finished the book we were studying this Fall and needed something to study during December. Bonnie, who really leads the group, suggested that we talk together each week about the sermons that Lou and I are preaching during Advent. I enjoyed critiquing Lou's sermon last week, but today I am keenly aware that a number of people watching this service are carefully taking notes so they can later share their opinions with me about this week's sermon. I'm not saying that I am nervous about this, but I seem to be unusually alert this morning!

We are continuing a series of sermons entitled, "When God Interrupts." We began with Moses, who resisted God's interruption in his life. Last week we saw Jesus respond to an interruption with compassion. This morning we come to the story of Zechariah, a classic Advent text.

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. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. (Luke 1:5-7)

Luke roots this story firmly in actual history, as King Herod reigned in Judea from about 37BC- 4BC. Zechariah was a priest late in Herod's reign. He and his wife were regarded as wonderful, godly people, but there is a paradox here. Elizabeth is unexpectedly unable to bear children. In those days, infertility was regarded as something of a curse from God. What's going on here? Let's keep reading.

⁸Once when (Zechariah) was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for 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. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With 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.” (Lk. 1:8-17)

There's a lot going on here. First of all, there were many thousands of priests in Israel, and only enough work in the temple for a fraction of that number. So priests rotated their service in the temple, serving just two weeks each year. Zechariah was called up to serve, and one day he was chosen by lot to light the incense in the holiest room of the temple, an honor that a priest could only have one time in his life. This would have been the happiest day in Zechariah's life! And then it gets better, as an angel appears before him, telling him that his prayers have been answered and that he and his wife are going to have a son! And not just any son. This son will prepare the nation for the coming of the Messiah. This son will be John the Baptist!

Sometimes interruptions are joyous things- a new baby, a new job offer, acceptance at a college, or retirement. These events may interrupt our lives in profound ways, but they are usually happy times. That's what this interruption was- a time of over-the-top elation! But there's more!

¹⁸*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.”* ¹⁹*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. ²⁰But 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.” ²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. ²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion.” (Lk. 1:18-24a)

Here we find another way that God uses interruptions- to correct us! Zechariah doubts the word of the angel, which makes sense given his and Elizabeth’s advanced age. So he asks the angel to perform some kind of trick to prove that what he is saying is true. Not a good idea! In essence the angel says, “You want a sign? I’ll give you sign! Since you voiced your doubt about God’s promise, you won’t speak again until your mouth is ready to confess faith in the Lord! How’s that for a sign?” And that’s what happened. Zechariah was unable to speak when he left the inner chamber of the temple.

The angel acts here to correct Zechariah’s lack of faith. Although most of us would prefer to avoid the correction part of God’s interruptions, they are important. As a novice church youth director, right out of college, I

was having some problems with the Sr. Pastor and a few church members, even though the youth ministry was flourishing. A wise church member offered to take me out to lunch. During the meal, he commended me on the good things that were happening in our youth ministry, but he also gently called me out on a few things. Namely, he said I needed to learn to choose my battles, be more flexible, and learn to compromise. That was hard for me to hear, but because I respected this man, I listened carefully and tried to put his suggestions into practice. His correction interrupted my day and it stung, but God used it to help improve me and my ministry!

That's what God was doing with Zechariah in our story, and, as we'll see, it worked. In the next verses, Luke leaves Zechariah behind in Jerusalem, and moves on to the story of the same angel's visit to Mary, her special prayer, and her reunion with her cousin, Elizabeth. And then we come back to Zechariah and Elizabeth in verse 57.

⁵⁷Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." ⁶¹They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." ⁶²Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³He asked for a

writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him. (Lk. 1:57-66)

The child is born, Zechariah obeys the Lord by naming him John, and God heals him by restoring his voice! And the first words out of his mouth are words of praise to God. He learned the lesson God had for him, and now he could enjoy the healing of his voice that God gave him! Healing is another way God uses interruptions in our lives. For example, a serious illness may interrupt our lives, but God may intervene to heal us. A divorce is a terrible interruption, but again, God can bring healing in time. It's the same with other losses and changes that come into our lives. Often, God brings us through them to find healing on the other side. God can use interruptions in our lives to bring about his healing.

The story of Zechariah reminds us of three things to look for when we're experiencing interruptions, as most of us are right now. First, look for the joyful moments and celebrate them. Then, look for ways in which the interruptions may bring to the surface behaviors, habits, and patterns of the

heart which need to change, and make those changes. Finally, look for ways in which God may be bringing healing in the midst of an interruption, and thank God for that healing.