

## **Luke 1:5-22**

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. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 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. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 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. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 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.' 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.' 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. 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.'

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When 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.

### **“What Did Zachariah Say Even Though He Never Spoke?”**

**Rev. Charles Schuster**

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Well, this sermon's outstanding too. It's on humility. We'll want to understand what happened that day when Zechariah went into the sanctuary to fire up the incense and jump-start worship. We will want to understand what it was that rendered this preacher silent and cause the delay at the beginning of worship on that Sabbath day. You see, there are two things most preachers want to happen on Sunday. One is, we want to preach. That's why they call us preachers. We pray too, and they don't call us prayers. Secondly, we preachers want the worship service to start on time, so the service will end on time. When worship services go into extra innings, or overtime, there is sudden death. They kill the preacher.

You can have a choir sing a thirty-minute anthem or an organist launch into a Bach fugue or some random bell choir do ten verses of "Amazing Grace" and the service runs long, and then they go back to the back of the sanctuary and they blame the preacher who

preached the normal twenty minutes in the sermon. This time, the preacher couldn't preach because he was moved to silence. That's front-page headlines. And the service was delayed in starting because the preacher couldn't get it together. That merits a call to the bishop. But why? What cause the silence? What made the people have to wait? I don't buy what we just read. I think there was something else, and I'm fixing to tell you what I think it was. Maybe it was because Elizabeth told her husband she was going to have a baby. That could do it. When the unexpected are expecting, there's not a whole lot more that needs to be said. It could have been because the preacher heard the voice of the angel in the sanctuary.

Now, you might think most of us reverends often have revelations, but the truth of the matter is, and don't quote me on this, most of us preachers, when we call out to the Lord, we really don't expect the Lord to call back to us. We would prefer the still, small voice or the heart strangely warmed. I think Zechariah couldn't talk or wouldn't talk because it hit him – his son John would prepare the way for the Messiah. Zechariah and Elizabeth would parent the one who would prepare the way for the one whose words could save us, and I think Zechariah knew what those words were going to be. He understood. Zechariah knew what the Messiah would say. It's not complicated or strange or mysterious. It doesn't take a Biblical scholar to explain it, or a seer or a visionary or a mystic. It almost goes without saying, and Zechariah knew it. This Messiah, with the help of his son, Zechariah knew what this Messiah would say, and I'm going to tell you, at the end of the sermon, why he was quiet. Why he was quiet.

Well, the Messiah, Jesus, moving ahead... this Messiah was concerned about the horizontal plane. He was interested in how it is between us. Love your neighbor as yourself, he would say. If you sinned against your neighbor, and you're bringing your church pledge to the sanctuary on a Sunday morning, or an offering to the church, and you've got a problem with your neighbor, put your pledge down, put your offering down, and go deal with the neighbor. He said it. The horizontal plane, caring about how it is with us. That's what the Messiah said, important things like, when you give to others, you never know how far it goes. He didn't say it that way, but he told about the widow who gave two cents, and he told about the Samaritan who gave what he had to save a life, and the widow gave the biggest gift, did you notice? And the Samaritan lived the law, loving the neighbor as himself.

Bob Tole was a pastor at Christ United Methodist Church here in town, and now he's in a church in Louisville, and he tells a story about a man who worked at a hotel in Philadelphia. It was Christmas, and the city was crowded, and this older couple came late at night and the snow was falling, and the clerk behind the desk did something unusual. Now, maybe it was just because it was his nature, or maybe it was the story of the innkeeper in Bethlehem, I don't know, surely there is a sense of compassion that one has at Christmas time, plus the storm was dangerous, and sending an elderly couple out into the blizzard seemed cruel, but he said to them, "All of the rooms in the city are pretty much taken, and all of our rooms are taken as well. The hotels are filled. But I can't send you out into the storm at 1:00 in the morning. Would you be willing to take my room for the night? It's going to require that you wait a little bit, I've got to go clean it up, change

the sheets, that sort of thing.” The couple said they didn’t want to put him out like that, but the innkeeper said, “Don’t you worry about me, I’ve got a couch here behind this desk. I’ll be just fine.” So they went. And the next morning the elderly couple came and paid for the night, and then the old man said something strange. He said, “You’re the kind of manager who ought to be the boss of the best hotel in the country.” The innkeeper looked at the man and woman, and they all smiled together, and the innkeeper pretty much forgot the episode, wondered whatever happened to the couple, every night late at night when it snowed, especially around Christmas, he’d think of them. In my home town, in my grandparents’ home, on Thanksgiving and Christmas my cousins would come. German stock. Marauders. They would come, and we would sit around this big table, this big dining room table, and sometimes there would be a fight that would break out. Sometimes we were relatively well-behaved, no chewing with our mouths open, no kicking under the table, no banjo grip on the fork, no launching of LaSoeur pea across the room, and my grandmother would say to us, she’d say, “Ha, you boys have such good manners. You’re so well-behaved, I wouldn’t be afraid to take you to the Waldorf Astoria, the greatest hotel in the world.” The innkeeper in Philadelphia, his name was George Bolt, received a letter from the old man one day, asking him to come to New York City. The old man’s name was William. William wanted to show George the building he’d built, and he wanted to offer him a job. William Waldorf Astor had built the Waldorf Astoria, and the first manager of the greatest hotel in the world, where I never got to go, was George Bolt. When you give to others, you just never know how far it goes. That’s the horizontal horizon.

Elaine Stanovsky reminded us of this. Our new bishop told us, “Faith prepares us for times like these. It teaches us to look for the good news when all the news is bad. In the deepest darkness, we’re called to live with hope. A response to hardship is generosity. We have a choice, we can live in fear, or we can live in gratitude, and if we live in fear, then we will hoard everything. If we live in gratitude, then we will share it. Faith invites us to generosity.” She’s right, you know? If we live to give, we never know how far it goes.

Monique and Doug White learned this. They don’t have much. In fact, a year ago they were unemployed. Their trucking business had gone under. Last Thanksgiving they were living in a motel room. But Monique has a job in a dentist’s office, and Doug has a job as an electrician, and they live in a house, and they decided this Thanksgiving to invite anybody who didn’t have a place to come to their home for Thanksgiving, and fifteen people did. They put it on the Internet, you probably read about it. An old man who had no family, a veterinary student who was here from somewhere else and alone, a single mom with two kids and a dog. The dog was invited. It was a wonderful Thanksgiving feast. It was what Thanksgiving is supposed to be, it was giving from the heart. It was living to give, and you never know how far it goes.

We live in a world, such a strange, strange world, where terrorists attack a city and kill without aim or purpose. Where people will line up and push indoors and rush at merchandise to get a good price on a gift, and a clerk dies trampled by a mob, and fights break out over shopping baskets. It’s a strange world. But Gandhi was right when he said,

“What diminishes any one of us, diminishes all of us. And when a person is raised up, to that degree, the whole world is lifted.” And Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” He was concerned about the horizontal plane. Zechariah, the old priest, was speechless, and the people had to wait for worship to begin, and he and Elizabeth, the angel told them they were going to be parents of the one who was going to prepare the way for the Messiah. The Messiah Jesus, he would say some things. His words would save us. He would say, “When you give from the heart, you just never know how far it will go. Love your neighbor.”

He was equally concerned about the vertical plane, you know, the line between us and God. Love the Lord your God. How is it with your soul? French theologian Teilhard de Chardin was right when he said, “We’re not human beings having a spiritual experience. We’re spiritual beings having a human experience.” The vertical plane, the touch of the eternal, eternal life. Zechariah would be the father of the man who would be the one to prepare the Messiah. Jesus spoke of eternal life. The vertical plane. It appeared in a newspaper in Minnesota. Judy Zimmerold reported it. Three-year-old Katy was taken to the pediatrician, she had the flu, and the doctor examined her ears and asked, “Will I find Big Bird in here?” Katy looked apprehensive and said, “No.” Before examining her throat, he said, “Will I find the cookie monster in here?” Katy said no. Finally listening to her heart he asked, “Will I find Barney in here?” And with innocent faith and spiritual wisdom she looked that doctor right straight in the eye and said, “No, Jesus is in my heart. Barney’s on my underwear.”

God is in our hearts. Jesus said God is in your heart. Jesus spoke of the vertical plane. If we have love, we know God. We have eternal life. He told Nicodemus, he said, “You teach the law, you don’t even know the law. What it’s about is, don’t you know? God loved the world, gave God’s only son. Whoever believes is going to have eternal life.” We live from the heart, from love. We never need to fear death. We will understand eternal life, and if we understand the nature of God as love, and if we live that love, death has no power over us. Love the lord your God.

Many of you are or were teachers. Let me see your hands, who have ever been or are teachers. Let me see how many teachers we have. Oh my. Some of you taught grade school and some of you taught in high school, some of you taught in college. I had the pleasure of teaching at the seminary level, at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, and over the years I’ve had the honor of having some minimal influence on a number of the clergy we’ve had appointed to our church. Joyce Curtis and Don Bird were students I had in class. Some of you know Karen Lowe, she was a student years ago, and recently Pam Everhart was in a class I taught on church doctrine. I get no credit for their brilliance, but I feel I’ve failed some of them, like the former student who tried to bring a church member up on charges because he said I taught him that disagreeing with the preacher was a chargeable offense. Where, oh where, did he get that idea?

Several years ago when I was teaching a class on church law, I had a student in the class who had had a successful career as an attorney, Joan Uda. She came to class wearing a three-piece suit. Her responses were crisp and clear, and her papers were logical and

accurate, and one of the first papers she turned in, I gave her the letter grade of A-minus, but under that grade, I said that I thought she had answered the questions appropriately, had acquitted herself sufficiently, but the paper was dull, it lacked passion, it was boring. I went on to say that being boring is something we cannot afford in the parish, and if she couldn't find passion for her ministry, maybe she ought to reconsider getting out of it. She wasn't very happy. She left that class in tears and threatened to drop my class and file a complaint. Well, she didn't drop the class. She's retired now, she lives in Montana, and I learned about two weeks ago that Joan has written a book. The title of the book is *At the Water's Edge*. Not only that, that book has won a significant award as a best book in the *Book News* magazine. I wrote and congratulated her for her book and the award and said I must have been mistaken when I suggested she was a dull writer. Made me think of a friend of mine who once told Hale Irwin he would never make it in golf. Joan sent me a copy of the book. As I read through it, I really don't think I was wrong about her writing, years ago. But the truth is, I think she's found something now that she didn't have then. She's learned something she never knew. She writes about her parents and how they loved her. She writes about her first husband, who threatened to kill her. She writes about running for judge. She ran twice and lost both times. She writes about her marriage to Lowell, the love of her life. She writes about her children and her grandchildren and her hip surgery. She writes about how she's changed. "I look back at myself as a young woman and I have to laugh. I was so full of myself. I heard talk in the church about new life, and I viewed it as somewhere between quaint and foolish. God, church, Christian renewal, life eternal belonged to my parents' generation, maybe my grandparents'. Now God renews me. God keeps calling and nudging me onward. There are vistas ahead for me that I had never dreamed of. My faith is strong. My life is full of love and joy. God's blessings, they're without end. Eternal life."

Harry Drummond said it, he said, "We find as we look back upon our life that those moments when we have truly lived are the moments when we have done things in the spirit of love." I think Joan is more alive than she's ever been, and it shows in the way she lives and the way she writes. When we love from the heart, we have God in our lives, and death loses its power. A church member sent me this story about a little girl whose 14-year-old dog Abby died. Meredith dictated a letter, her mother wrote the letter, to God. "Dear God, please take care of my dog. She died yesterday and she's up with you in Heaven. I miss her very much. I'm happy that you let me have her as my dog, even though she got sick. I hope you'll play with her. She likes to play with balls and likes to swim. I'm sending a picture of her, so when you see her, you'll know that she's my dog. I really miss her. Love, Meredith." They put the letter in an envelope, and they also put a picture of Abby the dog and Meredith in the envelope, and they put a return address on it. Meredith decided that she needed some extra stamps if it was going all the way to Heaven. A few days later a package arrived, wrapped in gold paper, addressed to Meredith. The writing on the package was something that they didn't recognize. Inside was a book by Mr. Rogers called, *When a Pet Dies*. Taped to the inside cover was the letter that Meredith had written to God in its opened envelope, and on the opposite page was the picture of Abby and Meredith and a note. "Dear Meredith, Abby arrived safely in Heaven. Having the picture was a big help. I recognized Abby right away. Abby isn't sick any more. Her spirit is up here with me, but it's also there with you, in your heart."

Abby loved being your dog. Since we don't need our bodies in Heaven, I don't have any pockets to keep the picture, so I'm sending it back in this little book. You can keep it. It will be a reminder. Thank you for the beautiful letter, and thank your mother for writing the letter and sending it. You have a wonderful mother. I send my blessings every day, and remember, I love you very much. By the way, I'm easy to find. I am wherever there is love. Signed, God."

So what. Just a clerk in a post office, somewhere, trying to put a child's sadness at ease. And yet it's more than that, more than a description of Heaven, more than a fictitious dialogue with God, more than a fairy tale for a child. It's a deep truth. When we live from the heart, we know life eternal, and death has no power. When we love the lord our God, the vertical plane. The horizontal plane, the vertical plane. The messiah Jesus spoke of both, and together, the shape of the cross. Such a simple message, a basic truth. Live to give, love to give with God. And Zechariah the old priest was speechless, and the people had to wait for worship to begin. He and Elizabeth, the angel told him they were going to be parents of the one who was going to prepare the way for the Messiah, and the Messiah would say some things that would save us. His words, "Love your neighbor as yourself, when you give to others you never know how far it goes. Live to give, and love the lord your God with all your heart, live the life of love, never fear death, eternal life, live to love God, love to live...." The Messiah would come, and Zechariah's son would prepare the way for him, and the Messiah would come and he would tell us how to give and how to live eternal life, and Zechariah was silent. The Messiah was coming to say what was obvious, so obvious, that it goes without saying. But Zechariah knew, and this is what made him quiet, because he knew with this Messiah, and his son's help, with this Messiah, what goes without saying will be said, and this time, people will hear it. And that will save us.