“This Is What the Lord Has Done for Me” December 2, 2018

Luke 1:1-25 NIV

1 Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

Luke begins by acknowledging Mark and Matthew who have already written accounts about the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, both from eyewitnesses.

With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, 3 I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke was writing for one man, Theophilus - to present an orderly account about Jesus. The title, “most excellent” gives it away that Theophilus is Roman for he wanted Theophilus to know for certain about what he had already been taught.

Thanks be to God this Roman officer decided to share Luke’s Gospel with others!

5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.

Luke sets the stage for Theophilus, as he starts with the historical marker of King Herod, a brutal man and ruthless leader. When civil war broke out in Rome, Herod first sided with Antony, the Roman Emperor, and Cleopatra, Queen and Pharaoh of Egypt. When Octavian, the future Caesar Augustus, defeated them, Herod immediately switched sides, received an appointment, and served for 33 years.

Herod was a strange mix of cruel yet clever administration. Never accepted as the true king of Israel by the Jews, Herod feared conspiracy - executing his wife, three of his sons, and his mother-in-law. He did rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem - some say, better than Solomon, but also built a mansion for himself next door.

That’s the historical situation! Luke then introduces Zechariah, a priest from a priestly division, and his wife, Elizabeth, who belonged to a more royal division. Luke is setting the birth of Jesus within the context of another birth, namely, John the Baptist.

6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. 7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.
Luke provides personal information about Zechariah and Elizabeth. They are good people, but without a child. Luke tells us they were both very old.

Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 8 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

At the time, there were 18,000 priests that were divided into divisions. Zechariah served in Jerusalem twice a year, but just once a lifetime in the temple.

10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Most of the time, the wives of priests traveled to Jerusalem for this time of service and devotion. It was their duty to pray for the priest who was selected to enter.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

Angels are a big part of the Christmas story. The priest was afraid, the same response by Mary and the shepherds when an angel appeared to them.

13 But the angel said to him: “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.

The angel comforted Zechariah and said that Zechariah’s prayer had been heard by God. He had been praying for his wife, Elizabeth, maybe prayers he had said for decades. The message by the angel is threefold: 1. Elizabeth will bear a child. 2. The child will be a son. 3. His name is John. All three messages shocked Zechariah.

14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

Further, the angel describes how John’s life will affect others. Obviously John will bring joy to Zechariah and Elizabeth, but more than that, John will be great in the eyes of God. People will be glad that John was born.

15 He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.
John will not drink, but be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before he is born. He will help people return to God.

17 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.”

To make ready a people prepared for the Lord! That’s the calling John the Baptist had - to have them repent, to have them change their minds about what is right, to have them open their hearts to the coming Messiah. Prepared for Jesus!

18 Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

Zechariah responded with almost the same words as Mary. “How can this be so?” He was a very pious man, yet his question is very human. Zechariah has a natural objection to the angel’s announcement: “We are well past our prime.”

19 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.

It seems as though the angel needs to share his credentials. Zechariah is in trouble and the angel tells him his name - “Gabriel” - and his standing - “I stand in the presence of God.”

This reminds of my mom when she used to say in a stern voice: “This is your mother speaking.”

20 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.”

Zechariah was punished because his question revealed a lack of belief.

Over the years of translation, there has been a disagreement about the phrase “you will be silent and not able to speak.” KJV bluntly has: “And behold, thou shalt be dumb and not able to speak.” Some have thought the word dumb - no longer an attractive word - meant “unable to hear,” but the text does not support such a view. I think Zechariah just lost his tongue, not his ear. The good news is this: the loss of words will not last forever! It will changed when John is born.

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.
“Meanwhile” - I love that word in stories. Meanwhile, the people, including Elizabeth had been waiting and praying, waiting and praying and wondering. During that time, Jewish people feared for the priest who was sent into the temple. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest went into the Holy of Holies. Out of fear of the Lord, the people tied a rope to one of his legs so that if he yelled, they could pull him out before the Lord killed the high priest.

22 When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

Zechariah lost his voice, and the people figured out he had seen a vision. It was hard trying to make the sign of an angel to the people. He stood before them speechless. This was an amazing moment for Zechariah, but he could not tell them about it.

23 When his time of service was completed, he returned home.

Zechariah and Elizabeth returned back to their home in the hill country of Judea.

24 After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.

Things happened, and she probably could not believe it. Maybe Zechariah got a writing tablet and told her about the message of Gabriel. Her disbelief turned into amazement as her body changed. Certainly her seclusion was an effort to prevent a miscarriage and just remain quiet.

Now, we finally get to hear from Elizabeth!

25 “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

Elizabeth felt disgrace. We don’t know if she ever told Zechariah about her disgrace. Maybe he could see it in her face when they visited friends who had children. Or maybe they did talk about it, and that was the reason for Zechariah’s prayer. The human part is this: Elizabeth felt she didn’t have the favor of her Lord.

Then upon the discovery of being pregnant, she gives all of the honor and credit to the Lord: “God has done this! God had shown me his favor! God has taken away my disgrace. The Lord has done this for me.”

Now, what can we learn from the story about Zechariah and Elizabeth?

First, God communicates to us however and whenever God desires.
I’ve never had an angel appear to me, but I believe God speaks to me every day. Sometimes with kindness and sometimes with rebuke! It’s not my responsibility to schedule God. It’s not my place to tell God what to do or when to speak to me. I just need to have an open heart.

**Second, there is a fine line between belief and unbelief.**

Zechariah, an honorable man, belonged to a priestly line. He observed the Ten Commandments and all of the rules for priests without fail. He believed. Yet, at the same time, he doubted and lost his voice because of his unbelief. No one is perfect. All of us fail. All of us sin. We believe and we doubt. We are like Peter the rock and we are like Thomas the doubter - right at the same time! Maybe we should actively pray about the fine line between belief and unbelief. Maybe there is a pendulum between the two – between obedient faith and obvious disregard. Maybe the Lord just wants us to be human and honest and just rely upon God’s love.

**Third, we must learn the difference between disgrace and grace.**

For me, it hurts to hear Elizabeth say, “The Lord has taken away my disgrace among the people.” Over the years, I have worked with many people who didn’t have children or who never got married or who never had grandchildren. Often they felt bad. I don’t want to lessen the feelings that Elizabeth had or dismiss her disappointment with life. At times, we can feel angry with God. Life doesn’t turn out the way we had planned, and we can resent God. I don’t think any of the residents in Paradise, California, thought their entire town would be wiped out. I don’t think any of the Tree of Life worshippers in Pittsburg thought that some friends and family members would be killed right before worship. We must not lessen the feelings of Elizabeth because it reminds all of us that our life plans don’t always work out the way we planned.

But thanks be to God for grace! Disappointment is not the last word. Grace is the last word. Grace is the answer to our questions. Grace is the movement of God in our lives. Grace is the definition of Christmas. Grace is the reason God sent Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. Grace is the baby in the manger. Grace is the star in the sky that gives us hope. Grace is what God gave Elizabeth long ago, and grace is what God wants to give us right now.