

Sermons
Preparing for the Lord (Part 3)
Luke 1:5-25
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I invite you to take your Bibles with me this morning and, again, to Luke's gospel. For the last couple of weeks, we've been studying a remarkable part of the Christmas story that's often overlooked. And that is, the announcement of the birth of John.

On Friday, we celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ. His name is Jesus. He is called the Christ. It's that title that occurs most often with Jesus' name in the New Testament. In fact, the word "Christ" appears some 500 times in the New Testament to refer to Jesus. But the word "Christ", the English word "Christ", is not a translation of a Greek word. It is, in fact, a transliteration of the Greek word *Christos*. It simply carried over from Greek into English. And the word *Christos*, is a Greek translation of a Hebrew word. The Hebrew word is *Hamaschiach*, that is, the Messiah. So, it means the Anointed One both in Hebrew (the Messiah, it means the Anointed One) and *Christos*, in Greek, means the Anointed One, and "Christ", in English, means the Anointed One. So, whenever in the New Testament you read the word "Christ", understand that is not part of Jesus' name. It is instead a title. Jesus is His name, and He is called the Messiah - the specially Anointed One, the long-promised Messiah.

The last prophet of Israel, Malachi, 400 years before Jesus had promised that the Messiah would come, but that before Messiah came, there would be a messenger that would come first and prepare the way. That messenger is named John. We call him John the Baptist. He is absolutely crucial to the story of Jesus Christ. In fact, even though all of the gospel accounts (the four gospels) don't include the birth of Christ, they all include the ministry of John because John is at the heart of Jesus' credentials as Christ or Messiah. So, in a very real sense, the Christmas story does not begin with the announcement to Mary, but rather with the announcement of the birth of John to Zacharias.

For the last two Sundays we've been studying together Luke 1, beginning in verse 5. For those of you who are visiting with us today or this is your first Sunday, I'll try to bring you up to

speed. But in some senses, you've missed an important part of the story. But let me see if I can set the stage for us all and remind, even those of us who were here, of sort of the way this story has unfolded in several remarkable movements.

The first movement that we saw together is in verse 5. It's the historical context: "In the days of Herod, king of Judea..." This was not an imaginary, fictional story. This story happened at a particular time in history and in a particular place. The place was that tiny strip of land, the land bridge, between the three great continents of the ancient world - Europe and Asia and Africa. It happened during the time of Herod, Herod the Great, probably around 6 or 7 BC. That's the historical context.

The second movement that we saw in this passage was a godly priest. A godly priest. We're introduced to him, beginning in verse 5: "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years." At this point, they're more than 60 years old. They've given up all hope of having a child. But they're both a godly couple before the Lord. So, we're introduced then to this godly priest.

The third movement we saw together was a unique privilege. A unique privilege. We see this in verses 8 through 10: "Now it happened that while he [Zacharias] was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his [particular priestly] division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering." It was on one particular day, recorded here, during one of his two weeks of annual service at the temple, that Zacharias was chosen by lot for the most privileged duty any priest could have; and that was to go into the temple, that is, to go in that massive building that was 50 yards wide and 50 yards high at its entrance - to go in the door, into the holy place, and offer the incense which symbolized the prayers of God rising to... the prayers of the people, rather, rising to God. That was a special privilege. He had never done this before. In fact, a priest could only

do this one time his entire life. And that day, he'd been chosen by lot. He'd gotten the white stone and, out of the 700 plus priests that served with him that day, he was chosen. And he got to go to this special duty, a unique privilege.

The fourth movement that we've seen together is an angelic messenger. We see this angelic messenger in verses 11 and 12. There, Zacharias, on this incredibly special day, the one opportunity in his whole life (a priest was only allowed to do this once, if he got to do it at all) - on that one day, a messenger shows up. Verse 11: "And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense [we later learned this is Gabriel]. Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him." You understand this if you put this appearance in perspective. As we learned last week, it had been 500 years since an angel had appeared to anyone. It had been 400 years since God had spoken through a prophet. God had been silent. Nothing miraculous had happened, no events like that, for 400 years. But on that special day in the life of this godly priest, God breaks His silence. And He sends Gabriel who stands in His presence. An angelic messenger.

The fifth movement, as the story continues to unfold, is an extraordinary announcement. The angel brings an extraordinary announcement. You see, Zacharias didn't yet know it, but God was about to answer both of his prayers - his personal prayer for a son and his priestly prayer that at that very moment it was the custom, as the priest presented the incense offering, to offer his own prayer and to pray that God would send the Redeemer to Israel, that He would send the Savior, the Messiah, the long-promised One. And the Angel says to Zacharias, "*Zacharias, you're going to have a son, and you're going to call him John*" (which means God is gracious).

In verses 14 to 17, the angel fills out who this John will become and what his ministry will be. I want you to look especially at verses 16 and 17, because in verses 16 and 17, we see the ministry that this man will have. Gabriel explains that John's ministry will be twofold.

Last week, we ended our time by looking at the first part of his twofold ministry. We saw last time, in verse 16, that he would be a prophet preaching repentance. Look at verse 16: "And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God." That is an expression right out

of the Old Testament. The prophet's job was to turn people back from their sin to God. So, he would come as a prophet preaching repentance.

Now that brings us, today, to the other part of Gabriel's extraordinary announcement about the ministry that this unique son would have. Not only would he be a prophet preaching repentance, but verse 17 tells us he would also be a forerunner, preparing for Messiah. Look at verse 17. And, again, put yourself in Zacharias' shoes, as he hears the angel tell him this: "It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him..." Now, you'll notice in our English text... If you're using a New American Standard, as I am, you'll see that the words "as a forerunner" are in italics. That means the translators have added them **to** give some sense of the meaning. Literally, the text says (in the Greek text), "It is he who will go before Him". Go before whom? Well, these words are borrowed from the prophecy of Malachi. There are two prophecies in Malachi that the messenger would come and then the Messiah. Both of those prophecies were partially fulfilled at Christ's first coming. And both will be ultimately fulfilled in the second coming. But here, Gabriel tells Zacharias that his son, John, would be the messenger Malachi had promised. But who is it that he's to go before?

Well, turn back to Malachi. I want you to see this. Malachi (the last book of the Old Testament) 3:1. Malachi writes, "'Behold [and this is God speaking now], I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me.'" "My messenger", here, is where we learn in the New Testament, is John. In the first coming, this is John the Baptist. "I am going to send My messenger" [Jesus explained this text was John], and he will clear the way [notice] before Me." The Lord is speaking, and the Lord says, "*My messenger is going to come and he's going to prepare the way for Me.*" "And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple..." So, the messenger then, John the Baptist, goes before the Lord Himself. **This** verse and chapter 4:5-6 - these verses are a promise, at the end of the Old Testament record, listen carefully, that the Lord Himself would enter time and space. And there would be a messenger that would come before Him to prepare the way.

The image here is of an ancient monarch who has decided to go out and visit a particular city or village within his realm. And before he actually goes, he sends an official representative before

him to prepare everything for his arrival so that he can come. Same thing happens today. I don't know if you're familiar with or have heard or read anything about the office of the President of the US but, under all of the presidents who served, **there is** a staff member whose responsibility it is to coordinate and a number of staff, whose job it is to go and prepare for the arrival of the President. They deal with a variety of issues. They deal with transportation and lodging, various food issues and sensitivities. They deal with protocols of how things should work - ceremony of what things should be done, in what order, safety, etc. etc. etc. Those who have that job have to be specially trained, specially experienced, and equipped to prepare the way for the President's arrival.

Well, the same was true for the Messiah's representative who was sent to prepare the way for Him. Notice verse 17 says that this forerunner would serve in the spirit and power of Elijah. His ministry would have the same attitude, the same power, the same results as that of Elijah.

Now, I don't know how familiar you are with Elijah of the Old Testament and his times, but I'll tell you this, Elijah served in one of the darkest periods of Old Testament history. In fact, things were so bad that in his time, there was a king named Ahab. And Ahab, a king of Israel, married a daughter of Ethbaal, King of the Zidonians. That is a city in Phoenicia. And they were all Baal worshippers. Her name was Jezebel. Ahab and Jezebel, together, built Baal temples in Israel for the people of God to use in worship. And they hired, on the government payroll, 450 prophets of Baal. Through Elijah's ministry, especially that wonderful confrontation on Mount Carmel, many of God's people who had become Baal worshippers, were turned from their idolatry back to God.

And that's exactly what the ministry of John the Baptist would be like. He would come into what amounted to idolatry, what Judaism of the first century had become, and he would turn people back to the Lord their God. He would fulfill his ministry in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Then notice in verse 17 the Angel Gabriel uses the words of Malachi. He says that John will "TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous..." That is how John will prepare the people for the Lord's arrival.

His ministry will affect real repentance and real change, both in their relationships and in their attitudes. Children and fathers would be reconciled. Relationships would be what God intended for them to be. And those who, as a pattern of life, are disobedient would begin to manifest true change - not merely external change but at the attitude level, at the heart level. They would manifest the attitude of the righteous. Incredible change!

If you want to see a picture of what kind of change the Lord wanted John to bring, turn over to Luke's gospel because in Luke 3, Luke quotes another prophecy about John - this prophecy, not from Malachi, but from Isaiah. And in this prophecy is a graphic illustration of the radical change that has to occur in a heart and life to prepare for the Lord.

Look at Luke 3. Verse 3 says, "And he [John] came into all the district around the Jordan [at a certain time], preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins..." And then he quotes Isaiah. You'll notice that verses 4, 5, and 6 are in all caps, at least in my translation and probably in yours as well. That means it's a quotation from the Old Testament. He's quoting from Isaiah 40 here. And it says that before Messiah came there would be a messenger to clear His way, so that it would be prepared for His arrival.

Notice he's described as the voice crying; the voice of one crying. **That** refers to a loud cry or a shout heard from a great distance. What would this prophet shout to the people of the land? Notice the end of verse 4: "MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT." Get ready! The Lord is coming!

And then he illustrates it in verse 5: "EVERY RAVINE WILL BE FILLED, AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL WILL BE BROUGHT LOW; THE CROOKED WILL BECOME STRAIGHT, AND THE ROUGH ROADS SMOOTH; AND ALL FLESH WILL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD." Now this is an image of preparing the road to a city. You see, roads at that time were not properly maintained as unfortunately is often true in our time as well. So, the herald went before the king, announcing his arrival, and encouraging the people to prepare the roads for the king. This involved everything modern road building requires but with primitive tools and equipment. It meant removing obstacles. It meant building bridges and

causeways, straightening crooked roads, filling in valleys, leveling hills. This is what God was doing through John in preparing for the Messiah, not a physical road (are you ready for this?), but a picture of how the human heart has to be prepared, a road if you will, for the Lord to enter into the hearts of people. It's a call for repentance.

If we're going to be ready for the coming of Messiah, then we have to be prepared spiritually and morally. There has to be a straight road, if you will, for the Lord to come. This is a call to true repentance. The humble must be exalted. The proud and arrogant must be humbled. The crooked life needs to be made straight. And the rough places, smooth. It's talking about repentance.

Now, look back at chapter 1, because of the end of verse 17, he explains what all of this is for (the goal): "so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." That's John's ministry. Get the road right. Get ready! The King is coming. The Lord is coming. Prepare for the Lord's arrival in time and space.

The question is: if you're John, and you're given that assignment, how do you go about that? How do you prepare for the Lord's coming. As far as we know, John never performed a single miracle. What he did was to preach. Luke 3:3 says, he came "preaching". The Greek word is a familiar New Testament word. It means to proclaim as a herald. This was the characteristic of his ministry. He preached the truth. He taught the people the truth of God. Paul's letter to Timothy - this same method as commanded of all New Testament elders. 2 Timothy 4: "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season...", that is, be ready to preach when it's popular and when it's not. We're certainly in a day when it's not. This is what God prescribed. Preaching was and still is God's method.

But there was another part of John's ministry that was very unusual, not only preaching but his baptism. This was even unexpected. John came preaching and, what? Baptizing. What was that about? Well, the most likely background for John's baptism was Jewish proselyte baptism. By John's time, if you were a Gentile, and you wanted to become a practicing Jew, you wanted to become a true proselyte to Judaism, with full standing as a child of the covenant to Abraham,

the rabbis taught you had to do three things. You were a Gentile, wanted to become a practicing Jew, 3 responsibilities. Number 1, *corban*, which meant you had to offer a sacrifice or a burnt offering. Number 2, *milah*, which was circumcision if you were a man. And the third was *tvilah*, which is baptism.

There had to be - for this particular baptism, there had to be 3 witnesses, usually members of the Sanhedrin (the 70 members of the ruling Jewish council). A person would prepare by cutting their hair and their nails. They would be completely undressed. They would then make a confession of faith - the great Shema of Deuteronomy 6: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one [Lord]!" And then their entire body would be submerged under the water so that the water touched every part. And as that person stepped out of the waters, the rabbi said, "He was a child of one day" or "He was like a little child just born". He had been birthed, as it were, into a new relationship with the God of Israel. That was the background into which John came.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. It was a proselyte baptism, listen carefully, but not for Gentiles - for Jews. John came preaching to the Jewish people, "*You are no closer to the kingdom of God than the Gentiles are. If you want to become a part of the true kingdom that the Messiah is going to usher in, you need proselyte baptism.*" John's fiery preaching and his baptism, his demanding of even Jews to be baptized as proselytes - both of those were intended to prepare the way for the Messiah.

Was he successful? Absolutely! Mark describes a little bit of the impact of his ministry. Mark says, "And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem..." All the surrounding regions were going out to John in an endless stream of humanity. And thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands, of the Jewish people went out through the wilderness to see John, to hear his preaching, and to be baptized by him. Josephus, the Jewish historian writing for the Romans near the end of the first century, wrote more about John than he wrote about Jesus. John had an extraordinary ministry. His role was to go before the Lord and prepare people for His coming, by his preaching and by his baptism.

But there was one more crucial part of John's ministry, and it was this: John was called to identify the Messiah, to point Him out, to say, "*There He is. He's the one!*" You know, if you were to go back to the Old Testament, there were dozens of Old Testament prophecies about the coming of Messiah and each one, as the Old Testament history flows, becomes more and more specific until there is only one possible person he could be.

The first clue to Messiah, His identity, comes in the third chapter of Genesis, at the fall of man, when in Genesis 3:15 we learned that **the** Messiah would be a human being, but He would be an unusual one because He's called the "seed of the woman". In Genesis 12, God explains that the blessed one, the Messiah, would come from the descendants of Abraham and not from the rest of the world. And then, with each generation, the revelation gets more specific. He'll come through Isaac and not Ishmael. He'll come through Jacob and not Esau. He'll come through Judah and not the other eleven sons of Jacob. Later, we learn that He'll come through David, and not the rest of the tribe of Judah, and through Solomon and not the rest of David's sons. And so, it's like this funnel that begins huge. He'll be a human being in Genesis 3, and it keeps narrowing and narrowing and narrowing. Isaiah tells us that this descendant of David will be born of a virgin. Micah tells us He'll be born in Bethlehem. So, that by the time you reach the New Testament, the prophecies of the Old Testament are like this huge divine arrow that point at one person.

But that's not enough, because after Jesus was born, there were other witnesses who add their testimony to who Jesus was. There was the army of angels to the shepherds. There were the shepherds who, as we read this morning, became eyewitnesses themselves and gave testimony to who He was. There was Simeon and Anna - those two godly saints, well known in the temple grounds at the time. Within the first two years of Jesus' life, Magi showed up (kingmakers showed up from the east) and they announced when the Messiah was born and where He was born, they discovered. And so, it becomes more specific. Even Herod the Great gave his own testimony in a sort of twisted way to Jesus in that he was so convinced at the truth of the Magi's story, that he sent and killed all of the children two years and younger, in the surrounding areas of Bethlehem.

But all that wasn't enough because the Old Testament, in both Isaiah and Malachi, God had promised that He would send a messenger who would announce the coming of Messiah. But how do we know who the messenger is? Well, to make sure we knew who the messenger was, he announced it to Zacharias, a righteous and devout priest, during the one time in his life he was in the temple burning incense, when the eyes of all of Israel would have been on this lowly humble priest. The messenger was to be his son, John. And he would identify the Messiah.

How did John accomplish his mission? Very well! Look over in John 1. He identified Him beyond question. John 1:19: "This is the testimony of John [that is, John the Baptist], when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?'"

Now, understand the context. Jesus, you remember, was born. He lived for 30 years. About 30, He began His ministry. The first thing that happened was He was baptized by John in the Jordan and then immediately driven by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days, where He was tempted by Satan. After that time, some point after that, Jesus officially begins His ministry. This is the first week of Jesus' official ministry. **It's going to** come to consummation on the seventh day of that week with His first miracle: the turning of the water into wine at Cana. But notice this is the first part of that week of ministry. He's been baptized already. He's had the temptation.

Verse 19: "This is the testimony of John..." He hears, "Who are you?" Verse 20: "And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ [the Messiah].' They asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah? [Are you the One promised? They thought it was actually going to be Elijah who would come, not one who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah].' And he said, 'I am not [I am not Elijah].' Are you the Prophet?" In Deuteronomy 18, there was the promise of the prophet who was actually Jesus Himself, according to the New Testament, but they thought the prophet might be another forerunner. "[So] Are you [another forerunner] the Prophet?" And he answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?'

Verse 23, he quotes Isaiah, and he says, "[I am the fulfillment of that prophecy]. I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD',

as Isaiah the prophet said.’ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, and said to him, ‘Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ [Messiah], nor Elijah, nor the Prophet [you’re not the forerunners]?’ John answered them saying, ‘I baptize in water, but [watch this] among you stands One whom you do not know.’” In other words, the Messiah is here already.

Verse 27: “It is He who comes after me [and I’m not willing to do the job of the lowliest slave toward Him], the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” Verse 28: “These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.” The next day [so this is the second day of that first week of Jesus’ ministry, the next day] he saw Jesus coming to him [Now he’s already baptized Him. He knows who He is. He sees Him coming and he says to Him] and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’” There He is!

Verse 30: “This is He on behalf of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, [watch this] for He existed before me.’” If you know the timeline of the New Testament, you know that Jesus wasn’t announced until six months into John’s - the pregnancy with John, Elizabeth’s pregnancy with John. So, he wasn’t born after him... or he wasn’t born before Him, in terms of time, so he has to be saying, “*He’s more than I am. He is both God and man. He existed before me.*”

Verse 31: “I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water. John testified saying, ‘I have seen the Spirit [this was at His baptism] descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. I did not recognize Him [now, remember, John is His cousin. He knew Jesus. But he said I didn’t know He was the Messiah], but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One...’” Verse 34: “I myself have seen, and have testified that this [as he points to Jesus] is the Son of God.” Could it be any clearer than that? He pointed Him out and he said, “There He is.” That was his job, as announced by the Angel Gabriel in his extraordinary announcement to Zacharias.

There's one final movement in this story, in Luke 1, that I want you to see. It's the varied reactions. The varied reactions of the various people involved. The first reaction is Zacharias's reaction, and it is a surprising unbelief. Surprising unbelief. Look at verse 18: "Zacharias said to the angel [Gabriel], 'How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.'"

You know, it's very interesting the difference between Mary's response, six months later, and Zachariah's response here. In fact, look at verse 34 of Luke 1. You see her response. "Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'" Now, if you look at the marginal rating for the word "can", you see literally it's the word "will". Mary said, "How *will* this be, since I am a virgin?" Her wording was very important because it shows that she didn't doubt. This *will* be my only question is, *how*? How is this going to happen since I'm a virgin?

But listen to Zacharias question. Let me read you his question as it literally appears in the Greek text. This is what he said, "*According to what will I know this, for I myself am an old man and my wife has advanced in her days.*" He wasn't asking, "*How will it happen?*" He was asking, "***How do I know this is really going to happen?***" In spite of the fact that he prayed for a son for many years, in spite of the fact that God had arranged for him to have a once in a lifetime opportunity to burn the incense in the temple on that day, in spite of the fact that an angel actually appeared to him and told him he would have a son, Zacharias didn't believe it. He essentially says this to the angel: "Look, people my age and the age of Elizabeth my wife don't become parents. How can you assure me this is going to happen." He wanted a sign.

Now, obviously Zacharias is responsible for his sin of unbelief. By the way, I see God's grace here, because God answers his prayer knowing he didn't believe, even when he's told it's going to happen. Has that ever happened to you? But he wants a sign. He's responsible for that sin of unbelief. But, as God always does, God uses even Zacharias' sin for His own purposes, because think of how this confirms all of this to us. Zacharias' refusal to believe makes it clear to us that he was not some high-strung, gullible priest. He wasn't there looking for, hoping for, the miraculous. He wasn't subject to the power of suggestion. He was a sensible man who seriously

doubted what he was told even when an angel showed up and told him. So, Zacharias reaction is a surprising unbelief.

Next, the text gives us God's reaction, God's reaction to Zacharias' unbelief, and it is an inconvenient sign. An inconvenient sign. You want a sign? I'll give you a sign. Zacharias had said... in the... it's interesting, in fact, the wordplay **in the** Greek text again. Zacharias said to the angel, "I myself am an old man." In verse 19, the angel responds, "I [myself] am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."

We talked about Gabriel last time, so I won't go there again. But here, Gabriel tells us two crucial things about his message. He tells us that he normally stood in the presence of God, but God had sent him to Zacharias and the message itself, the good news, came from God. He was speaking on God's behalf, and it was God that Zacharias had not believed.

Verse 20: "And behold [because of that, here's the chastening that going to be - here's the sign and the chastening], you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time."

Zacharias wanted to sign, a sign he'll get, but it's a most inconvenient sign. For nine plus months, he will not be able to speak or to make a sound. Why? Gabriel says because you did not believe my words.

You know, there were other people in biblical history who asked for signs, like Gideon. But when they asked for signs, they asked for signs to strengthen their faith - not that we should do that. But their motive was good. It was to strengthen their faith. Zacharias, here, wants a sign because he doesn't believe. Oh, and by the way, Gabriel says, "*My words will be fulfilled in their proper time.*" It's still that way in God's economy, isn't it? My faith, my unbelief, your faith, your unbelief doesn't change God's reality. Zacharias was mute. It was a chastening of his unbelief.

But it wasn't merely a chastening of his own unbelief, nor was it merely a sign to prove the promise to him. It was a sign to all of Israel. Remember, as this unfolds, as all this is happening, it's happening inside the Holy Place, inside that massive temple on 35 acres. That huge temple stood 50 yards wide, 50 yards high at its entrance. He'd gone in that door and all the people of Israel are there for the hour of prayer. That means the court of the priests would have been filled with the 700 plus priests that were serving with him, looking at the door, waiting for him to come out. It means the court of Israel, where the Jewish men gathered, would have been filled with Jewish men, waiting for the priest to come out from offering **the** incense offering. It means the court of the women, which is a sort of two-story balcony that surrounded all of that, would have been filled with Jewish women, waiting for the priest to come out, all praying. Usually, after the priest had offered the incense offering, he came out to the steps, and he recited the priestly blessing of Numbers 6. And all the other priests, the 700 plus priests, would join in with their voices and, in a sort of descant, repeating it as well the blessing recorded in Numbers 6 that Sheila and I sing to our kids every night: "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up His countenance on you and give you peace."

He was supposed to come out and say those words. But verse 21 says, "The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple." The Talmud taught that (one of the Jewish documents the rabbis put together) said that, you know, a priest who offered the incense offering should come out quickly, lest he be guilty of profaning in some way the Holy Place and be struck dead. And so, they're wondering what's going on. Why the delay?

Verse 22: "But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them [he couldn't give the priestly blessing. He couldn't say what he was supposed to say. Some other priest had to fill in. And everything was awkward]; and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he kept making signs to them, and remained mute." So, his inability to speak punctuated, for all of those people gathered there, that something dramatic had happened while he was in the temple. He had to try to make signs to explain it.

Verse 23 says, “When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home.” So, even though he couldn’t speak, he stayed the rest of his week of service there at the temple. And certainly, in those days, he would have explained in writing at least some of what the angel had told to him. And then when his week was over, he went home to the hill country. So, God’s response to Zacharias is to give him and all of Israel a sign: Zacharias would be mute for the next nine months.

Now, that brings us to the last reaction and it’s Elizabeth’s reaction. And it’s one of being amazed by grace. Being amazed by grace. Look at verse 24: “After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, ‘This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men.’” They lived in a culture when to have children was a sign of God’s favor. Not to have children, was a sign of His disfavor. And so, there was a disgrace that came with not having children. She becomes pregnant.

And then it says she kept herself secluded for five months. Why? Well, the text doesn’t tell us, but the implication is that entire little town knew this elderly couple. They knew they had no children. And now they know that supposedly an angel has shown up and told them they’re going to have a child, a son. And so, she kept herself in seclusion until it was obvious that she was pregnant so she wouldn’t be an ongoing object of ridicule, as perhaps she had been in the past, so as not to add to her disgrace.

And she praised God for His favor, His grace toward her. God had done this before with Abraham and Sarah when they were much older. And here He does it again with this godly couple, Zacharias and Elizabeth. And He did it in answer to their prayer for a son and in answer to the priest’s prayer that Messiah would come. And the answer was a man named John who would be their son and would announce the coming of Messiah and identify Him.

Now, very quickly, let me ask this question: Why did God include this story, the story of the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Zacharias? Why is it here in Scripture? Why did God

send John as the messenger? And why is this story important to us? Very quickly, let me give you three reasons that this is important - three reasons it's important for us.

Number one: it's given to strengthen the faith of those who already believe in Jesus. You remember where this story occurs? It begins in Luke 1:5. Look back at Luke's introduction. Verse 1: "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us [that is the life of Christ], just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses [that's the apostles] ..." Verse 3: "it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus..." Here's a Greek Christian and Luke has written this. He's investigated. He's written it out. Why?

Verse 4 (here's why these things are here): "so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught." You may know the historical data, the historical reliability of your - on which your faith rests. Folks, we don't have a blind leap of faith. These things are written to show us that there were real historical persons, in real historical places, that our faith is not **an** awkward add-on to Judaism, carefully patched in some terrible way onto a finished faith. Instead, the Old Testament ended with the promise - the Messiah will come but before He comes, the messenger will come. The New Testament opens with the messenger announcing the Messiah. Our faith is in perfect continuity with the Old Testament. Our faith has a basis on which to rest. God wanted you to know, as He says here to Theophilus, that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught. It should strengthen your faith. God did exactly what He said. Our faith is reliable. It's built on historical basis, and not fiction, not fairytale. He sent the messenger, the messenger came, and the messenger pointed Jesus out in person. There He is!

There's a second reason this story is important. Not only to strengthen the faith of those who already believe, but to provide a foundation for the faith of those who have not yet come to believe in Jesus. Look over in John's gospel, John 1. In John 1, the apostle John writes about John the messenger. Verse 6, John 1: "There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. He was

not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.” Listen, God sent John into the world so that all (notice that in verse 7?) that all might believe through him, that is, “little h”, through John’s testimony. God sent John to provide a foundation for your faith.

If you’re here this morning and you have perhaps heard these stories all your life, but you have never come to the place in your own life where you have **embraced** Jesus Christ as your Lord and your Savior, He’s just a personage that you’ve heard about, perhaps you’ve not even really believed Him to be true - but even if you have believed Him to be true, He’s never intersected with your life. You have never acknowledged Him as Lord. This is - John is given to give you a foundation for faith. God sent a messenger to say, *“There He is. You can accept Him because God has kept His word. He’s done exactly what He promised.”* God couldn’t have made it any clearer that Jesus Christ was the anointed One, the appointed One, the promised One. Are you going to believe him or not?

There’s a third reason this story is important. And it’s honestly a difficult one. It’s to leave those who refuse to believe in Christ, without any excuse. I want you to look at John’s last testimony about Jesus - John 3. John 3 - this is the last thing John said about Jesus. You’ll notice, verse 26, they come and ask John a question. Verse 27 of John 3, John answered this. So, here’s John’s last testimony about Jesus. Verse 28: “You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Christ [Messiah],’ but, ‘I have been sent ahead of Him...’ [I’m just the] friend of the bridegroom [verse 29. Jesus is the bridegroom]”. Verse 30: “He must increase, but I must decrease.” Verse 31: “He [Jesus] who comes from above is above all...” Verse 32: “What He [Jesus] has [personally] seen and heard, of that He testifies [of the things He teaches. He’s been in God’s presence] ...” Verse 34: “For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God...” Verse 35: “The Father loves the Son [He’s the Son of God] and has given all things into His hand.”

And here’s how John ends his testimony. Verse 36 (the last testimony to Christ): “He who believes in the Son has eternal life...” Right now, as a present possession, if you believe in Jesus Christ, if you’ve embraced him as Lord and Savior, you have eternal life. **It’s** your possession now - a different kind of life, spiritual life, that allows you to know God. “But (verse 36) he who

does not obey the Son...” Now, notice he wants us to know that the belief he’s talking about is more than just a recognition of the facts, because when he uses the parallel expression in verse 36, it’s “obey”. “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not *obey* the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God [he uses the present tense] abides [is abiding] on him [right now].”

The person who refuses to accept God’s testimony of His Son... Right now, if you’re here this morning, you have never bowed your knee to Jesus Christ, John the messenger says this: as you sit here this morning, the wrath of God hangs over you like a stain you will never get rid of and someday, it will unleash itself in its full fury on you. He was sent to remove all excuse. No one will ever be able to stand before God and say, “God, I didn’t know. I wasn’t sure. You didn’t provide enough evidence.” John says: the one who believes has life. The one who does not obey the Son has not life, and the wrath of God remains on him, forever.

Let’s pray together.

Father these are sobering things. But we thank You so much that, in Your love for us, You sent the messenger, that You sent John to point out the Messiah, to make it clear that Jesus of Nazareth was Your Son, the Lamb of God, the promised One. Father, may those of us who know Him, may it strengthen our faith as we read this historical account. Father, for those here this morning who don’t, I pray that this would be the day when they would truly bow their knee to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, acknowledging His right to rule in their life. May this be the Christmas when He becomes their King. Father may they not be those of whom John described that the wrath of God remains on them. We pray that You would do Your work in every heart, by Your Spirit. For it’s in the name of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah, we pray, Amen!