

## Do Not Doubt, But Believe (Advent)

Luke 1:5-25

Cradock Presbyterian Church

December 2, 2012

Sometimes you just can't believe what's happening!

Or maybe you can't believe it's happening to you. Even when you're getting clear signs that it really is about you, you just think, "How can this be? Things like this don't happen to me!" It'd be like the Publisher's Clearinghouse guy showing up at your door, with that big ol' check. You knew when you sent the contest thing in you'd never win, right? So if he actually showed up – well, there must be some mistake! Things like this don't happen to me! Even when he shows you your name on the check – you still have a hard time believing it's true.

That's the way you have to look at this story about the birth of John, at least, through Zechariah's eyes. We know from what Luke says that Elizabeth, his wife, was old and past child-bearing age by a long ways. Zechariah was old, too! If you thought only about what was possible for humans, no way they were going to have a child. I'm sure, as he went into the Temple to do his duty, he wasn't even thinking about having children. His duty was to go as far into the Temple as he safely could, stopping just short of the Holy of Holies; there was a special incense altar there, where twice a day incense was burned. God, it was hoped, would come from time to time to enjoy the incense, and thus be close to his people.

So Zechariah should have known that it was at least *possible* that something heavenly could happen. Without fanfare, apparently, there was suddenly an angel from God right there with him, in the position of power and authority at the right side of the

altar. Of course he was terrified, because in those days they thought you might be dead if you were seeing angels. But the angel told him, "Don't be afraid," and then told him the most amazing thing. His wife was going to have a son!

Now, wait a minute! Did he know how old she was? This never happened! Oh, wait a minute – it did happen once; fellow named Abraham, with his wife Sarah. Yeah, they were real old, too. Wasn't there a purpose to that, though?

And the angel went on: "you will name him John." Funny; when Abraham was told he'd have a son, he was told what to name him, too. The angel said, "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth." Hmm – Abraham was told that he would rejoice at having descendants as numerous as the stars in the skies. The angel finished up; his boy John would have an assignment, he was being born "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." The same thing Isaac, Abraham's son, was born to do; one of his descendants was Moses. So there was a precedent! Maybe God was working again! But through ME, Zechariah?

You'd think a good priest, a holy man steeped in the faith, like Zechariah, would get it. He didn't. Instead, he got into a version of "Things like this don't happen to me!" Accompanied with a recitation of why it couldn't happen, according to the facts of the world: "I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." He didn't get the connection with Abraham. He didn't see that God was acting to save the world all over again.

So – if you were in his place, would you do any better? I already know the answer for me – NO, probably not. Because there's a lot going on here that's awfully

scary. First, of course, there IS that thing about a sudden appearance from heaven. No matter how many times an angel says, "Do not be afraid," you're going to be afraid! It's going to take some work to get unafraid. But then there's the other part of it, the personal part. That's the fear that is: can I do what I'm being asked to do?

Strange question? Not at all! Listen to the requirements being listed for John: "He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit." Those are the requirements for a Nazirite priest; there are a lot MORE requirements that aren't listed here, but this was enough to cue Zechariah that he was going to have to raise John in a very careful way. Wait, there's more! "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." *Oh*. That's talk about a *prophet*. Zechariah and Elizabeth are going to have to raise a *prophet* as well as a priest. Can they even do this? Lots of doubt here! Do you think you could pull off this feat? Would you have the confidence to do it?

If you are thinking like Zechariah thought, and doubting the outcome, then you also missed the obvious clues in what the angel said. The angel says "will," as in "shall;" this isn't "might" or "maybe," it's *this is going to happen*. The original language is clear. *God* is going to make sure it does happen. Zechariah and Elizabeth will succeed in birthing the child and raising him to do what God has called him to do. Zechariah should see this!

But since he doesn't – well, what good is an unconvinced spokesman? Besides, what could Zechariah say that could add anything beyond what God has already done, in seeing to it that John came into the world? Better to have him silent until the time is right, after John is born.

There is one more thing to consider, and it explains why God made it happen this way. I mentioned earlier how this thing looked a lot like the story of Abraham and Sarah, and how that all led to God creating a people for himself, Israel. It's fair to say that the reason this story looks so familiar is that in John, God really is doing the same thing again. In Abraham and Isaac the stage was being set for Moses and the Exodus from Egypt, the great saving act for Israel. In John the stage was being set for the great saving act for all people, Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead.

See, that's the thing that drives away all doubts, and proves that what the angel said is true. As you look backwards from this side of the cross, you can see that John *did* grow up to prophesy Jesus' coming; he did prepare his way, and present him to the world, launching his ministry. The power of this new salvation has spread forward even to today, so we are saved, too. Not even the powerful doubt of Zechariah could stop what God willed for the world.

So it's clear that Zechariah did believe, because John was born of Zechariah and Elizabeth and did grow up and do what he was called to do. You know, he got his voice back when he obeyed God and named his son John. You and I don't get clear instructions, like Zechariah did from those angels. Ours aren't as dramatic. But I believe they're there. Our big problem is believing we're good enough for God to call on. We

have to tell ourselves, “Yes, things like this do happen to me, because I belong to God.”

We have to remember that we belong to God because of the things that happened starting with this conception of John, going through the birth of Jesus, and ending with his death and resurrection. If we can remember, then we will have no reason to doubt, and every reason to believe. And abundant reason to rejoice.