

The Encounter with God—Zechariah **Title: How Are We Like Zechariah?**

This Christmastime I want us to enter into the meaning of the season through 4 people or groups who encountered God: Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, the Shepherds and the wise men. Each one met God in a unique way and their response to God's revelations has many connecting points for us. We start with Zechariah's story.

Who: Luke 1:1-20: Zechariah was a priest. Luke tells us he was "upright in the spirit of God, observing all the Lord's commandments blamelessly, as did his godly wife."

His Encounter took place at the Temple, at the Altar of Incense. Incense, from the book of Revelation represents the prayers of the saints. This is significant because Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying their whole married life for a child, yet they were still barren. This was an issue of shame for her, particularly. Now, at the time of the encounter Luke notes they were "hopelessly old." (v. 7).

As Zechariah was ministering at that altar, the angel Gabriel appeared to him (Gabriel is the one who "stands in the presence of the Lord"—apparently one of the highest-ranking angels among all the angels). When Zechariah saw him he "*was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bare you a son. You are to call him John—[not Zechariah as was the Jewish tradition to name their first-born sons after their father]. He will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will bring many Israelites back to their God. He will minister in the Spirit and power of Elijah. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*" Lk.1:12-17

The Response: When Zechariah responded, "How can this be?" He was thinking of the fact that both he and Elizabeth had been barren for decades and were now well past child-bearing age. Gabriel apparently saw Zechariah's heart and recognized that response as doubt. So Zechariah was made mute. He remained mute throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy. Then, eight days after the baby was born, and neighbors were there for the naming ceremony, they asked the father to write on a tablet the name of his son. The neighbors said, "His name is Zechariah, right?" But he wrote on the tablet, "No, his name is John," just as the angel had commanded. Through that obedience (Luke 1:63), he was healed. Then, we read in verse 67 Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesized about John's role and the nature of the Coming Messiah:

Luke 1:76-79 says:

*76 You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God...*

He described the Coming Messiah as a Mighty Savior, bringing salvation and light out of darkness as the holy prophets had said long ago.

Zechariah's encounter is where we start the Christmas story because of his son's role – to prepare the people to receive this coming Messiah and his own prophetic role once he was filled with the Spirit.

The Bible says when John was an adult, he fulfilled that prophecy. *We pick up the story in Luke 3:4-7: John went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching about baptism and repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

*4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:
He was "A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.
5 Every valley shall be filled in,*

*every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.
“And all people will see God’s salvation.”*

John spoke by the Spirit and prepared people for Christ by speaking the hard words people needed to hear to lead them to repentance. He is the one who identified Jesus as the Lamb of God when Jesus came to him for baptism. (Jn.1:29) He is the one who pointed his own disciples to Christ. At least two of those disciples became Christ’s own apostles (Andrew, and Simon (Lk.6:13-16). The prophecy given to Zechariah and then the Spirit-filled words of Zechariah once he could speak again were fulfilled.

Applications: So, what do we learn from Zechariah’s encounter with God? More specifically, how are we like Zechariah? I want us to consider three ways.

First, the birth of John was a supernatural birth that preceded Christ’s own supernatural incarnation. In other words, it set the stage for the miraculous. What miraculous thing does God want to do in yours and my life this season that shows others God’s reality? Something beyond our ability to produce or manufacture. Something with the mark of heaven on it. God can use us even when our faith is weak if our heart yearns to please him – as I’m sure Zechariah’s heart did.

Second, but what about our doubts? Do they hinder us from responding initially to God’s call when it takes us out of our comfort zone? Zechariah didn’t believe because his circumstances told him that what the angel said was impossible. Don’t we do that too? Beloved, there are consequences to doubt – sometimes immediately as happened to Zechariah; sometimes in the fall-out of a weakened faith and resulting lukewarm life. So, we need to be more like rubber bands: “A rubber band is made to stretch. When it is not being stretched, it is small and relaxed; but as long as it remains in that shape, it is not doing what it was made to do. When it stretches, it is enlarged; it becomes tense and dynamic, and it does what it was made to do. God created you to stretch.” *Charles Paul Conn in Making It Happen. Christianity Today, Vol. 36, no. 13.* Give your doubts to God and allow Him to stretch your faith. Don’t look at circumstances; look to God’s power and ability to bring to pass whatever He told you. Once Zechariah’s punishment was over, and he obeyed God in the naming of his son, he was restored in his faith, and then mightily used in his prophetic utterance. It was his son, as God intended, that prepared the nation for Jesus’ birth. Despite his doubt, God brought John into being.

Third, how can **we** help people get prepared to meet Jesus? That’s a crucial issue this holiday season as Christmas carols and the Christmas birth story are all around us. You can ask people what they think the season is all about and introduce them to God’s love and purpose of salvation through the coming of Jesus.

The importance of preparation is critical in so many aspects of life. Let me illustrate it with an example from WW II and the famous D Day invasion (June 6, 1944) that pushed back Hitler’s non-stop invasion of the European continent and ultimately brought an end to that war.

“One of the mostly unknown heroes of D-Day was a man who never set foot on a Normandy beach, never commanded a single troop and never wore a uniform—Andrew Jackson Higgins. He was the man responsible for designing and building the small landing boats that brought the troops onto the beaches on D-Day. If Higgins hadn’t had the foresight to see the need for them, then design and build them, the whole strategy of the war would have been different. And what’s even more amazing is that Higgins did it all without any request from the military—in fact he did so by pushing against the wishes of the US Navy. At the time, the Navy was only interested in larger vessels like destroyers and battleships. They had no interest in smaller vessels, especially not the ones that Higgins had in mind.

If you've ever seen a D-Day movie, you say Higgins' boats - the small landing vessels with flat bottoms and high sides that ushered the troops up to the beach, then dropped their flat bows into the water to let the troops exit straight ahead. The Navy didn't want Higgins' boats because their small size and flat bottoms meant they couldn't navigate across the English Channel.

But Higgins saw what the Navy couldn't see. That, after crossing the channel, the larger ships would not be able to get troops close enough to the shore. What actually happened was that dozens of battleships, scores of destroyers, transported personnel and equipment across the English Channel under the cover of darkness. Then, as tens of thousands of troops boarded thousands of Higgins Boats, the destroyers and battleships barraged the coastline from a distance to prepare it for the landing troops."

Higgins prepared the equipment that Allied forces used to bring ultimate victory against Hitler. Even when his secular world around him refused to embrace his idea and vision, he persevered and delivered what became the most important tool of the Navy in that war. The very boats the Navy needed to prepare for the Normandy invasion. As President Eisenhower told Stephen Ambrose "Higgins is the man who won the war for us." Stephen Ambrose's book [D-Day: The Climactic Battle of World War II](#). Adapted from Karl Vaters, "[The Man Who Saved The World By Thinking Small: A D-Day Tribute](#)," [CTPastors.com](#) (6-6-17) In the same way John prepared Jewish hearts to receive Jesus, who as Messiah would push back and ultimately defeat the forces of evil arraigned against God throughout the world.

We know that everyone did not listen to John the Baptist and everyone certainly did not receive Jesus as Messiah. But Jesus was victorious nonetheless and those who did believe subsequently "turned the world upside down." (Acts 17:6). Many of them had had their hearts prepared for Jesus by John's message and ministry. Never underestimate the importance of preparation, of being a voice crying in the wilderness.

Preparing people's hearts is a crucial part of our job as Christ's ambassadors. Has the Lord spoken to you about someone He wants you to reach or something He wants you to do – something that will stretch your faith but prepare the way for Jesus to come into someone else's life? Will you doubt and hold back as Zechariah did? Or will you respond to God's call looking at God's power and promises, not at circumstances?

Many of you have heard the story of how God rescued my sister from alcoholism, an affair and possible suicide when we were together at Christmas time some years ago. God told me to reach out to her, even though we were not on close terms at that point. I had hesitated and given God reasons why the question he put in my mind wouldn't work, but it did. And our subsequent conversation led her back into a relationship with Christ and spared her life. There may be family members you need to reach out to this season.

The good news is that God still uses fallen creatures. Although Zechariah's doubt incapacitated him from ministry and surely affected his marriage and his reputation, when he finally responded in obedience, God responded in mercy and healed him, and then filled him with the Spirit. His prophetic words ring with the truth and power of God.

This season may we each be filled with the Spirit so we too can be God's messengers – heralding the truths about Jesus as our secular cultures all over the world commercialize Christmas and strip it of any supernatural content. May our lives demonstrate the mark of God on them. May we speak prophetic words of the Spirit to our unbelieving family members and friends or to those who are living a lukewarm, nominal Christian life. Perhaps God will do a miracle through us this season. Let's pray it will be so and move from doubt to faith in our own encounters with God.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.

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