

Message: “Hope in the Darkness”

Pastor Chuck Swindol recently shared an encounter he had with an elementary school age Sunday school class. Pastor Swindol asked the class, “What’s small, gray and furry, with a bushy tail. It lives in trees, eats nuts and stores them for the winter?” There was a long pause and ... silence. The pastor said, “Don’t be shy.” Finally, one girl in the back sighed and raised her hand. When called on she said, “Well, I want to say it’s a squirrel, but I know the answer must be Jesus.”

Chuck’s response, “I’m sorry we’ve only shown you one part of what you know to be true.” The answer is, it’s a squirrel. Scripture tells us a lot about Jesus. And a relationship with Jesus makes the biggest difference we’ll ever experience in our lives. But scripture is also a record of humanity’s experience of God over several millennia. Throughout the pages, we find out how all sorts of people, from different times and places, encountered God in their daily lives.

This is the whole point of the biblical record. God didn’t need to write anything down. WE are the ones who needed to write down what happened, so we won’t forget or get caught up in speculation or make up our own version of events. God’s mysterious nature is revealed, aspect by aspect, over time to all people. Jesus, as God incarnate, God with us, is the clearest and best revelation of who God is and why faith matters.

This leads us to our Scripture reading for today from Luke 1:67-70.

I thought it would be helpful for us to look at the verses from the perspective of someone who is studying the Bible, perhaps for the first time. So let’s start with context. Who wrote the letter and who was their audience? What’s the historical setting? What is the author’s purpose? How are they experiencing God? It’s important to understand the circumstances so we know how to interpret what we read. This helps us understand how it applies or doesn’t apply to our lives.

Luke introduces the letter to his patron, Theophilus (v4). Luke is a Greek physician, writing to a non-Jewish audience. He’s a scientist, a learned person, able to read and write. Luke writes between 60-90 AD. It’s taken him some time to do his investigation. He’s providing a historical account the way they were done then.

Luke is upfront about his purpose. He’s “investigating everything from the beginning, using eyewitness accounts and materials handed down by those involved” (vv1-4). Luke is recording the events so his sponsor can understand what really happened. And, of course, anyone else who reads the letter can come away with the same understanding.

We appreciate this logical, scientific approach, particularly today. By reporting what was said and observed by those who were present, Luke is seeking to eliminate hyperbole and exaggeration. He’s leaving it up to the reader to draw their own conclusions. Okay, that’s the context. Next, let’s turn to the content.

Where did Luke start his investigation and why? One thing I think is significant is this: Luke didn’t start with Jesus. He didn’t start with Jesus’ parents. He didn’t start with John, the Baptist. Luke starts with an unlikely character, an elderly priest named Zechariah. The scene opens on an elderly man, lighting incense on the altar during the daily offering to God.

Luke gives us just a little background on Zechariah. He’s married to a woman named Elizabeth. They’re a devout couple, faithful in all they do. They have no children and are past the age when most couples would be having children.

Zechariah is part of a division of priests who serve in the temple. That’s his job. Moses’ brother Aaron established the practice of having twenty-four priestly divisions. Each of the divisions served in the temple for one week, twice a year, as well as major festivals. Since there were so many priests, an individual priest could only offer incense at the daily sacrifice once in their lifetime. Luke begins with the climatic moment of Zechariah’s priestly career, and it turns out to be more dramatic than anyone could imagine!

Luke’s writing is succinct, “*An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear*” (vv11-12). No one else is allowed in this part of the temple during the ceremony, so it’s easy to understand why Zechariah is surprised. There’s nothing special about someone lighting incense. He’s just a regular person.

The angel appearing is BIG news! Why? It's been almost 400 years since God last spoke to anyone in Israel. The last time anyone heard God's voice was the prophet Malachi, whose letter is the last in the Old Testament.

The people are living in darkness. They needed God. Israel has been occupied by a foreign power for 200 years. The political leaders are fractured, with three people jockeying for power. Their faith leaders seem ineffective and greedy. Most people feel powerless with little hope. People live hand-to-mouth. You must grow food or practice a craft or raise animals just to be able to feed your family. People are regularly put in jail for debt. Sadly, some parents sell their children into slavery to make ends meet, a practice which continues today.

Today we face darkness, too. The world economy is shaky. There is war between nations, openly and as a cold war. Democracy is struggling. People are lining up at borders around the world to escape violence, cruelty and retribution. Oppression is high. Misinformation fills the airwaves and our devices. Anxiety, depression and mental health problems are at an all-time high, as is violence towards others through mass shootings. Young people are disillusioned. We've lost our trust. We need to hear God's voice.

Why would an angel appear to Zechariah? I think God is making a point that matters to every person: God comes to us when we least expect it to reveal God's presence and invitation. It won't be flashy. There won't be a fanfare. It may be intrusive. No one else may sense God's presence, but we'll know it. Our soul knows. Zechariah knew God was speaking. The problem is he didn't know how to respond. Name my son John when I don't have a child??

How we respond matters. God can work through us, no matter what. We can believe or disbelieve. We can accept the invitation or drag our heels. When we read Zechariah's story, we know he believes in God, but he doesn't believe what the angel tells him. There's no way he and his wife Elizabeth can have a child. They're too old.

But God can do anything. Zechariah doesn't believe, so God gives him some time to think about it in silence. It could be a year or more.

This changes their lives in several key ways. Everyone quickly figures out something happened. Zechariah can't speak. His fellow priests don't know what to make of things. He's removed from his duties. After all, he can't talk and they don't understand what happened. They minimize him. Out of sight, out of mind. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? We may be isolated or even un-friended at times.

Zechariah is out of work. What should have been the high point of his career and life turned into a disaster. Elizabeth and he move to the hill country to live a quiet life. But, at some point, through natural means with some supernatural blessings, Elizabeth becomes pregnant. This reminds us of the lives of Abraham and Sarah, who gave birth to Isaac at the age of 99 or the story of Hannah who gave birth to Samuel.

Months pass until the baby is born. If childbirth wasn't hard enough on her, family and friends are giving Elizabeth grief over the child's name, of all things. It isn't a family name. You can hear the tongues wagging. Everyone's second-guessing her.

All of a sudden, they seem to remember Zechariah. The disgraced, silenced, minimized person, Elizabeth's partner in life and faith. Someone gives him a tablet to ask what he thinks. Zechariah grabs it and quickly writes, "His name is John!"

Zechariah is restored, just like that! He responds to God with faith, naming his son John, which is all he was asked to do. Such a simple act, but what an amazing impact it had.

Zechariah is so moved, he sings his joy to God in a song of blessing, praise and promise. Everyone who hears it is amazed. It sticks with them. They can't forget it. And they tell it to Luke years later, long after Zechariah and Elizabeth have been laid to rest. We read it together. This blessing connects us to the God moment, their family and the shared hope we have in a God who goes before us, dwells in us and works with us. God's blessing changes lives and draws other people in through love.

What did Zechariah sing? He sang of his love for God, whose blessings save us from the darkness inside us and the darkness outside us. He sang about the savior to come. He sang about the covenant

relationship we have with God, a relationship we don't need to fear, only accept and embrace. He sang about God's grace which saves all people, God's compassion which heals us and God's promise to be with us, no matter what may happen, for as long as we live. All who trust and believe are set apart, made holy by the very presence of God in our lives.

Zechariah then sang something very special and meaningful.

He sang the same blessing and promises to his newborn son, the one named John by God, the one who we would come to know as the Baptizer. Zechariah knew God's hand was on his family, but particularly his only child.

And so, this quiet, devout couple, seemingly robbed of their moment in the spotlight, find themselves at a turning point in history. They disappear from the pages after this, but their experience and blessing passes on. Their lives have meaning. Their faith literally opens the book of life to each of us and our families. We can experience the same blessing. Our lives have meaning. We can live life without fear. We can have hope. Everyone, everywhere is invited and welcome.

How will you receive Zechariah's song, God's blessing? God is speaking to you in ways you may not recognize, through those you may not know or voices you may not want to listen to. I hope you listen, accept the invitation, act on it and then pass it on. For when we do, our life story become part of the greatest life story of all: the story of our life as God's children. And that's a good thing. Praise God, alleluia.

Let us pray:

Holy Lord, we thank you for bringing us to this season of faith, hope, and love. As we look at our lives, we see evidence of the countless ways you have provided for our needs. Let gratitude well up in our hearts and overflow in generosity to others. Be with us and fill our households with family and friends, especially new friends as we gather this week. Draw us outward to see ways we can joyfully share what you have given with those who are in need. Let our acts of kindness as a church bear good fruit in the world. We ask this as those who are standing in darkness, seeking your Light. Amen.

Luke 1:67-80 (CEB)

John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,
"Bless the Lord God of Israel

because he has come to help and has delivered his people.

He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David's house,
just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago.

He has brought salvation from our enemies

and from the power of all those who hate us.

He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

and remembered his holy covenant,

the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham.

He has granted that we would be rescued

from the power of our enemies

so that we could serve him without fear,

in holiness and righteousness in God's eyes,

for as long as we live.

You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.

You will tell his people how to be saved

through the forgiveness of their sins.

Because of our God's deep compassion,

the dawn from heaven will break upon us,

to give light to those who are sitting in darkness

and in the shadow of death,

to guide us on the path of peace."

The child grew up, becoming strong in character. He was in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.