

**PIERCING THE DARKNESS AND
SHATTERING THE SILENCE**
The Birth Announcement of John the Baptist
Luke 1:5-14

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 23:4 – “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me;

Luther’s 95 Thesis – we understand that was God sovereignly and providentially rescuing us – we could say – from the dark ages of spiritual control that was in place at that time, 500 years ago.

Depression – even among pagan psychologists, it is described as the ‘darkness’ of depression

Beloved, darkness is a figurative expression that is used to talk about despair, heresy or error, and/or the lack of spiritual light.

What we have in our text this morning, is the blessed beginning of God’s light of the gospel piercing the darkness.

Luke 1:78-79 – A man name Zacharias who gives a prophecy – a beautiful picture of the gospel – of God piercing the darkness of sin with the light of Jesus Christ.

Luke 1:5-2:52 is the Gospel of Infancy

- abounds in dignity, beauty, and spirituality
- abounds in historical detail (historicity) and accuracy

This is standing at the threshold of the most marvelous period in all human history.

Both Matthew and Luke give the announcement and birth of Jesus. Luke is the only gospel writer who gives the announcement and birth of John the Baptist.

Luke has greater emphasis tying in the historical narrative of Christ to the larger Roman historical situation – **2:1; 3:1**

Herod the Great – this is the ‘Herod’ we read about here

- ruled from 37-4 B.C.
- appointed by Marc Antony
- was an Idumean/Edomite (descendant of Esau)
- Built → Herod’s Temple, Masada, and the Herodium

There are three other Herods we see in Scripture:

Herod Antipas – son of Herod the Great – F/ 4 B.C. to A.D. 39
(killed **John the Baptist**)

Herod Agrippa I – nephew of Antipas – A.D. 40-44
(killed **James** – eaten by worms)

Herod Agrippa II – son of Agrippa I last ruler of the
Herodian dynasty (**Paul** appears before)

Herod the Great was cruel, merciless, and vicious. He was incredibly jealous, suspicious of everybody, and always living in fear someone was going to take his position and power.

Illustration – not unlike people living in North Korea now under Kim Jong Un.

Herod’s last years as he approached 70 years of age, were especially characterized by bloody cruelty. His cruel jealousy led him to murder his brother-in-law, his mother-in-law, his wife, and 3 of his 12 sons.

Caesar Augustus said of **Herod**: *“It is better to be Herod’s dog than one of his children.”*

Matthew records when Herod discovered the Messiah was prophesied to be born in Bethlehem he ordered all the baby boys in the town to be murdered. At seventy years of age!

This was a dark, sinister, and terrible time for Israel.

It is dark days ... But God works in the darkness.
And God is getting ready to turn on the lights.

B. The Light of Piety

1:5b-6

→ Luke gives us their Pedigree

“^{5b}there was a certain priest named **Zacharias**, of the division of **Abijah**;”

Zacharias – only in Luke – 1:5, 12, 13, 18, 21, 40, 59, 67; 3:2

→ Hebrew – **Zechariah** – *YHWH* remembered

Abijah was a descendent of **Eleazar** and his division was the 8th of 24 divisions of the Temple priesthood (1 Chr 24:10).

- Only 4 of the 24 came back after the Babylonian exile (Ezra 2). They went back to the 24 and divided those 4 families of priests back into 24 and restored the old names.
- **Abijah** was not one of the 4 that returned, but the name Abijah was brought back into the priesthood.
- So, **Zacharias** was not necessarily a descendent of Abijah, but served in the division of Abijah.

“^{5c}and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was **Elizabeth**.”

Elizabeth – also only in Luke – 1:5, 7, 13, 24, 36, 40, 41, 57

A good name → same name as Aaron's wife (Exod 6:23)

So, both **Zacharias** and **Elizabeth** are from the line of Aaron.

As a priest, Zacharias was required to marry an Israelite virgin (Lev 21:14), but not necessarily the daughter of a priest.

Zacharias marrying the daughter of a priest is a double honor.

→ In the fullest sense, John will be of priestly birth.

→ Then Luke gives us their Piety

“⁶And they were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.”

They are justified – **“righteous in the sight of God”**

Isa 61:10 – “I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, My soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”

→ They aren’t merely justified, they are also sanctified.

“^{6b}**walking blamelessly**” – *blameless, free from fault or defect*: Nothing is lacking.

<p>Blameless means <u>consistency</u> and <u>integrity</u>; it means no one can point a credible finger of blame at them.</p>
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Illustration – Dan 6:5 – “We shall not find any ground of accusation against this **Daniel** unless we find it against him with regard to the law of his God.”

Word used to describe **Abraham** (Gen 17:1), **Job** (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3), and **Zacharias** and **Elizabeth** (Luke 1:6)

“^{6b}**in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.**”

This is moral integrity manifesting itself externally.

Illustration – Gen 6:9 – “**Noah** was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God.”

→ Irreproachable. **Zacharias** and **Elizabeth** have an authentic life that cannot be justly criticized. They have an earned character and reputation where an accusation won’t stick.

C. The **Darkness of Sterility** 1:7

Point – **Zacharias** and **Elizabeth** are righteous in the sight of God ... but they aren't righteous in the sight of men for wrong/erroneous thinking in the culture.

Proof – “^{7a}**And they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren,**”

“**barren**” → Huge in that culture!

This error is cruel. It's the cruel error of the word faith heresy that says if you aren't rich or prosperous or if you have trouble in your life, there is something spiritually wrong in your life. It's the error Job's friends. It is the error of the prevailing Jewish culture at the time of **Zacharias** and **Elizabeth** → **1:25** – “my disgrace among men.”

“^{7b}**and they were both advanced in years.**”

– they were at least over 60, possibly in their 70's or 80's.

[They didn't know that 60 is the new 40 😊]

KJV – “they both were *now* well stricken in years.” This has a nice ring to it that communicates clearly their situation.

- makes it clear there is no natural expectation for a pregnancy
- Mission impossible → **The Darkness of Sterility**

Illustration – Or **darkness** sleeping over the land.

Application – We can be **rays of light** in the darkness. And we can grow in intensity while waiting for the “sun of righteousness.”

II. **Bridging the Chasm**

Luke 1:3a

Point – Bridging the chasm between:

- God and man
- Old Covenant and New Covenant

God told Israel that one day, Messiah would come.
God had been preparing them for his coming for 2000 years.
The promise that He would come is recorded in the Old Testament; the fulfillment of that promise is recorded in the New Testament.

Herod's star is waning as Christ's light is dawning.
The Old Covenant is waning as the New Covenant is coming.

Proof – “⁸**Now it came about, while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division,**”

It was only by sacrifices that sinners could approach God.
It was only by priests operating in the temple that sinners could gain access to the Lord.

There was no mandatory retirement age for priests (there was for Levites) so **Zacharias** is still ministering.

→ during the appointed time for his Abijah division

“before God”

Illustration – In the context of the Reformation, the story is told of **Luther** and running out in the first mass he ever did with his father Hans present. Because Luther was coming to grips with:

- the holiness of God
- his own sinfulness

Application – I love church. I love our worship services.
I love the fellowship. I love the coffee. I love the joking banter
with my brothers. All these are good.

However, let us always remember, in a certain sense, we are coming into the presence of God, of Whom we join with the angels calling, **“Holy! Holy! Holy!”**

“⁹according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.”

Exod 30:7-8 → a great privilege and honor (they understood as God’s providential selection)

Josephus estimated that there were 20,000 priests at this time. The selection to be the priest to enter the Temple was decided by lot. A priest could only have this privilege once, so this means that **Zacharias**, with many years of serving, had never before been chosen for this great privilege ... to enter the Holy Place, right next to the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies....to go into the spot as close to the presence of God as anyone could ever get, with the exception of the High Priest on the one day of the year, The Great Day of Atonement.

“¹⁰And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.”

“multitude” – Luke the Gospel author with the particular heart for outsiders uses this word 25 times compared with 7 times by the rest of the New Testament authors.

After the introductory prologue in **1:1-4**, this is very Hebraic in thought → Luke, the Gentile, writes like a Greek, but thinks like a Hebrew → Greek words with Hebrew meaning

2 Reasons:

- 1) Luke is schooled with the Old Testament
- 2) The vast majority of his sources were Jewish

Illustration – Is there one thing you dream of accomplishing in your life? One great achievement? Maybe something academically or professionally?

Brian Hanna – Rim-to-Rim-to-Rim hike last month

Ron Lavin – recently appointed a Boeing Technical Fellow

Maybe something more in the fantasy dimension?

Illustration: When I was young playing little league baseball, I would dream of playing professionally. The fantasy would go something along the lines of ... it's the 7th game of the World Series. I'm at the plate. It's bottom of the 9th, 2 outs, we're down by 3 runs, I have a full count, and ... you guessed it ... the bases are loaded 😊

You can also guess how the fantasy ends – grand slam home run to win the World Series.

Application – Zacharias thought he had the opportunity of a lifetime when he was **chosen by lot** ... but he had NO IDEA just how significant and earth-shattering.

→ He is bridging the chasm between: God and man; the Old Covenant and the New Covenant

AND ... → this sets the stage for

Luke 23:45 – “the veil of the temple was torn in two.”

III. Shattering the Silence

Luke 1:3b

Point – All the promises of God hang there, suspended for centuries. The priests, at least the good ones, teach the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets. But there is an expectation and anticipation of the coming of Messiah, the Redemption and Consolation of Israel that has been hanging there for over 400 years.

Where was the day of which **Malachi** said, “for you who fear My name the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall. ³And you will tread down the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing, says the LORD of hosts.” (**Mal 4:2-3**)

Proof – “¹¹**And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.**”

The angel would be between the altar and the golden candlestick

God shatters centuries of silence, four centuries of intertestamental silence → There had been no prophet of God for 400 years until the birth of John the Baptist.

The first New Testament miracle occurred in over 500 years since Daniel 3 and 6 (**Furnace** and **Lion's Den**).

The last appearance of **Gabriel** was in Daniel 9.

God breaks this long silence exactly at the point where He stopped speaking at the end of **Malachi**. He picks up these loose threads and weaves the beautiful garment of divine revelation once again.

Herod's star is waning as Christ's light is dawning.
The Old Covenant is waning as the New Covenant is dawning.
Barrenness is waning as supernatural Blessing is dawning.

By the way, **Herod the Great** was the one still building this **temple** in Jerusalem where **Zacharias** the priest is serving God when the angel comes to him.

“**an angel of the Lord**” – Notice Luke doesn't describe anything about the appearance of the angel.

“Most books on angels in popular culture are written with a closed Bible and a fertile imagination.” (Alistair Begg)

There is no description, but there is immediate reaction on the part of Zacharias.

Point – The invasion of eternity in humanity is always earth shattering and nerve wracking.

Proof – “¹²**And Zacharias was troubled when he saw *him*, and fear gripped him.**”

→ Literally – “and fear fell upon him”

In our previous ‘What We Teach’ series:

→ Ministry of Angels:

- to believers → **Messengers, Ministers, Protectors, Watchers**
- to unbelievers → **Executioners**

It is beautiful and terrifying to come face-to-face with a heavenly visitor anytime. But remember again where **Zacharias** is at ... in the Holy Place.

The ministry of angels he is thinking is not that of a protector or a watcher. He is not thinking Gabriel is there to protect. He is probably thinking, “Oh no. I blew it.” “The angel is here to execute.”

“^{13a}**But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zacharias,’**
→ The same Luke who wrote **12:2-5**

Luke writes much about fear – the right kind of fear – fear God - and the wrong kind of fear – fear of man.

- Exhortation → fear God!
- Consolation → Do not fear!

1:30 – “the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God””

“^{13b}**for your petition has been heard,**”

“**petition**” – translated as “prayer” (e.g., Phil 1:4, 19)

OK. His prayer has been heard What prayer?
...is this for a child? ... or for something else?

It is a little bit of a ‘both/and’ prayer.

- the tense suggests a onetime prayer rather than habitual
- not prayer for a child (like Isaac – Gen 25:21 😊)

- prayer for the coming of Messiah and Redemption of Israel

BUT there is an added blessing going back to answer prayers from years past.

Application– Beloved, always remember your prayers are not rejected because God delays in answering them. Remember, your prayers are never rejected. If you are a child of God, God hears you and God answers in His time in His way.

God may not always come when we want Him. But He is always on time.

Point – It is a both/and for the child and the redemption of Israel.

Proof – “^{13c}**and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son**”

- God meets the darkness of sterility with the light of fertility

Sovereignty!

Gen 11:30 (**Sara**); 25:21 (**Rebekah**); 29:31 (**Rachel**)

Jgs 13:2-3 (**Samson’s mother**); 1 Sam 2:5 (1:5 – **Hannah**)

Luke 1:7, 36 (**Elizabeth**)

Who opens and closes wombs? Who is sovereign over fertilization, conception, procreation, gestation?

“^{13d}**and you will give him the name John.**”

John means – ‘gift’ or ‘the Lord is gracious’

“¹⁴**And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.**”

“**joy and gladness**” – throughout Luke – joy, rejoice, rejoice greatly, exultation, cheer, gladness

“**gladness**” – (extreme) joy, feeling of great happiness, often with body movements such as jumping, smiling, and laughing

The great joy of a child and the broader and even greater joy of the coming of Messiah and the redemption of Israel.

Zacharias and Elizabeth were really part of a remnant, true godly Jews in the midst of a nation of apostates. There were more. And we’re going to meet more: **Joseph, Mary, Anna**, that old lady in the temple, and **Simeon**, that old man. They were part of the remnant. They were part of the remnant who were hanging on to Malachi’s words that the sun of righteousness is going to rise and hoping it would be in their lifetime.

CONCLUSION

Psalms 107: 10-16 - God piercing the darkness:

¹⁰There were those who dwelt in darkness and in the shadow of death,

Prisoners in misery and chains,

¹¹ Because they had rebelled against the words of God
And spurned the counsel of the Most High.

¹² Therefore He humbled their heart with labor;
They stumbled and there was none to help.

¹³ Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble;
He saved them out of their distresses.

¹⁴ He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death
And broke their bands apart.

¹⁵ Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness,
And for His wonders to the sons of men!

¹⁶ For He has shattered gates of bronze
And cut bars of iron asunder.

Psalms 107:43 – God shattering the silence:

⁴³Who is wise? Let him give heed to these things,
And consider the loving kindnesses of the LORD.

What are ‘these things’? The ancient words that we are
commanded by God to heed.

From the hymn we sang today: Ancient Words

*Holy words long preserved
for our walk in this world,
They resound with God's own heart
Oh, let the Ancient words impart.*

*Words of Life, words of Hope
Give us strength, help us cope
In this world, where e'er we roam
Ancient words will guide us Home.*

*Ancient words ever true
Changing me, and changing you.
We have come with open hearts
Oh let the ancient words impart.*