

Sermon, December 1, 2024. Don't Be Afraid, Zechariah

When I first heard the idea of looking at the four Biblical characters in the Christmas story, that were visited by angels, I thought of something I wrote years ago. You may recall my sharing it with you. It went like this.

Angels were important at that first advent,  
bringing messages from God wherever they went.

Elderly Zechariah, faithful at prayer,  
was told something absurd, your prayers have been heard.

A young girl Mary, planning for her wedding,  
was told 'you are special' and 'you'll get pregnant without a bedding.'

To a troubled Joseph, on a sleepless night,  
God's message was simple, I'm at work, things will be alright

The shepherds in the fields, protecting their ewes,  
eventually welcomed the message, finally, some good news

So, no matter your age or what you are doing,  
pay attention to the angels and the message they are bringing.

God's message is consistent, "Don't be afraid!"  
Life is going to be different, but don't be dismayed."

Not only should you listen to the angels around you,  
but apply for the job, the benefits may astound you.

Who are the people at this time of year,  
who need to hear God's message "I'm at work, do not fear."

The words "do not fear" or "do not be afraid" seem as needed today, as they were over 2000 years ago.

This morning, we are focusing on elderly Zechariah. When you think of the characters in the Christmas Story, does Zechariah come to your mind? He doesn't usually come to mine. I recall Zechariah's wife Elisabeth, or more likely, their son, John the Baptist – mainly because of songs like: [Prepare ye the way of the Lord](#) from Godspell or

[Prepare the way of the Lord, \(2x\) that all people may see the salvation of our God.](#)

But of Zechariah himself, I remembered that he was told by an angel that his elderly wife would have a baby and when he questioned this, he could no longer speak.

Imagine, if you and I were struck mute for a time, when we question God's message to us how different our world might be.

To help us look at Zechariah's visit by an angel, I decided to imagine how he might have described his experience to his wife, Elizabeth, ... after he could speak again. As you listen, I invite you to compare your own experiences with prayer with Zechariah's. (PUT ON SHAWL)

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to share what my husband, Zechariah told me about his amazing experience with an angel.

First let me tell you a little about us. We were Jews living under the oppression of the Roman Empire when Herod was the puppet King of Judea. Our people had been praying for generations for a Messiah to deliver us from the oppression of our enemies. My husband, Zechariah, was a priest a hereditary position. My father was also a priest. It was the norm for women born into priestly families to marry priests.

Zechariah and I were doing our best to do what was right, to love God and carefully follow God's commandments. A big disappointment in our lives was that we did not have any children. Because we were both elderly now, we had stopped praying for them. Since children were considered a blessing from God and I was not given any children, some people looked down me. That was painful to live with.

But now to Zechariah's visit from an angel. It happened this one time when Zechariah left our home in the hill country near Jerusalem to spend a week serving at the temple in Jerusalem. Something his ancestral division of priests did twice a year. This week was different than any other as he won the lottery! That's right, there was a lottery to determine which of the many duties each priest would carry out. One was chosen from the hundreds of available priests each day, to go into the temple to offer

the incense offering on the alter. The incense was made up of a fragrant blend of spices prescribed in the law of Moses. The smoke of the incense rising to heaven, symbolized the prayers of the people gathered for prayer in the outer court.

Zechariah told me that it was after lighting the incense, as he was praying, when he sensed he was not alone. He opened his eyes and saw an angel! He was scared out of his wits. He knew from the Hebrew scriptures that the appearance of heavenly beings could bring “bad” news as well as “good” news and usually demanded a response, by word or action.

The angel said “ Don't be afraid, Zechariah! While Zechariah was wondering what was coming next, the angel went on to say: “Your prayers have been heard.” Zechariah wondered, was God finally sending the Messiah? Then the angel shocked him by saying ...he and I would have a son! We were to name our baby John. The angel told him that our child would bring much joy to us and others as he would be filled with the Holy Spirit, be a great servant of the Lord, lead many people back to God, preparing them for the arrival of the Lord.

Zechariah said he was so overwhelmed; all he could think about was how was it possible for all this to happen since he and I were so old? And so, he asked “How can I be sure of this?”

The angel was not impressed with Zechariah's response and said, “I am Gabriel sent from God to tell you this good news.” And then because Zechariah hadn't automatically believed him Gabriel told Zechariah he would not be able to speak until our child was born! Zechariah said that he had wanted to argue with Gabriel, but he couldn't ... because his voice had left him!

Now, it was the custom for the priest to come out of the temple as soon as he was finished lighting the incense and praying. Zechariah didn't say how long his conversation with the angel took. Others told me, the delay had started to make the crowd nervous. When he finally came out, he gestured that he couldn't give the usual blessing. From the look on his face the people guessed he had seen a vision.

When the week of his service was up, he came home, and before long, I realized I was pregnant! I could hardly believe it! My prayers had been answered! I said to myself, “What the Lord has done for me, will keep people from looking down on me now.” And then there was the long “quiet” wait for our child to be born.

Zechariah told me that his speechlessness initially felt like a cruel and unusual punishment. Eventually he experienced it as a gift. It changed his life. Since he couldn't speak, he spent much more time in prayer. E.g. He prayed the Psalms. Psalm. 46.10 was especially meaningful.

["Be still and know that I am God."](#) 3x

Zechariah said he learned to listen more carefully to people. He noticed God working in people's lives in ways he had never noticed before.

When our baby was finally born, everyone was happy for us. On the eighth day after his birth, we brought him to the Temple for naming and circumcision. When the priest asked what his name was I said "John", as Zachariah had written me a note saying that the angel had said his name should be John. Since it was normal for babies to be named after family members, and we had no relatives named John, Zechariah was asked to confirm this. He wrote on the tablet they gave him. "His name is John." And immediately Zechariah could speak again! He burst forth in praise to God quoting from the psalms and the prophets about God's faithfulness, God's salvation and God's peace.

For the rest of Zechariah's life, he kept sharing the angel's message "Don't be afraid, your prayers have been heard!" Thank you for listening to his story. TAKE OFF SHAWL

Did you identify with any of the prayer experiences of Zechariah? E.g. Have you ever been tempted to give up on prayer, because you didn't get the answer you were looking for, in the time frame you wanted? Have you ever been visited by an angel or sensed God speaking to you while you were praying? Have you ever heard the words "Don't be Afraid" "Your prayers have been heard." Have you ever had a life-changing experience from a forced or chosen ... long period of silence? How do you respond when your prayers are answered? These are some of the things we can discuss during worship response time.

In closing I'll leave you with Phil. 4.6 a scripture that God frequently brings to my mind when I am feeling overwhelmed with fears or worries and wonder if God is hearing my prayers.

[Don't worry about anything](#)

[Instead pray... about everything](#)

[Tell God what you need](#)

[And thank God for all God has done. \(2x\)](#)

[And the peace of God](#)

[Far beyond what we can understand](#)

Will guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus.

My prayer is ... that we like Zechariah, will both hear and experience, as well as share God's message this advent, "Do not be afraid, your prayers have been heard." Thanks be to God.