

Luke 1:8-20, 26-38
A Better Way: Living in the Gospel (1)
“Zechariah and Mary”

Introduction

Starting today and continuing through the end of March, we will be doing a new sermon series entitled "A Better Way: Living in the Gospel". The Scriptures we will read together are from the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament. Luke's Gospel is written in a distinctive style. There are contrasts and comparisons between two people, and this way of depicting them runs through the entire gospel. As we take a closer look at these contrasts and comparisons, I would like for us to taste what the good news or gospel is. Today, I will focus on the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1, verses 8 through 20, and verses 26 through 38, under the title of "Zechariah and Mary." We will contrast and compare these two people.

Luke 1:8-20, 26-38

⁸ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty,

⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,

¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,

¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."

¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth,
²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.
²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"
²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.
³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.
³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.
³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,
³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."
³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"
³⁵ And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.
³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.
³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God."
³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

I would like to bring out two points from this passage. First, an angel spoke to Zechariah, but he did not believe what he was told. Second, an angel also appeared to Mary, and she did believe what was told to her.

First of all, the angel spoke to Zechariah, but Zechariah did not believe what the angel said. Look at verse 8.

1:8. Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty,

We see in verse 8 what kind of a man Zechariah was. He was a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. He was a descendant of Levi, one of the ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel, and of Aaron, who held the priestly office of intercessor between God and man. In those days, the priests worked in teams to perform various ceremonies and duties in the temple. Here, in Luke 1, the team to which Zechariah belonged were assigned to serve. Look at verse 9.

1:9. . . . according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

It was customary for the priests to cast lots to determine their duties. By lot, Zechariah was chosen to enter the temple of the Lord to burn incense. Because the duties were determined by lot, some priests throughout their lives were never chosen to enter the temple of the Lord, and some were not ever allowed to enter the central part of the temple called the sanctuary. To enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense means that they were entrusted with the role of entering the sanctuary and burning incense to appease the wrath of God. At that time, outside, the people who had come to worship were praying for forgiveness and appeasement from God.

1:10. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

Now, look at verses 11 and 12.

1:11, 12. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

As Zechariah was about to perform his work in the temple, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and stood at the right side of the altar where the incense was burning. Even priests do not have such an experience as this, so Zechariah was troubled. In the Old Testament, the appearance of God's messenger was a time of judgment from God. So it is not surprising that Zacharias was distraught and fearful.

1:13. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, was also a woman of the lineage of Aaron the Levite. Luke tells us that they were both righteous before God, but that they had no children. Elizabeth was barren, and both were already old. The angel told Zechariah that they would have a son. He told him to name him "John," which means "the Lord is gracious." Incidentally, "Zechariah" means "the Lord remembers."

1:14-17. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers

to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

The angel of the Lord told Zechariah what the boy would be like who would be given to them. He told them that the child would be used by the Lord to turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He also told them that the boy would walk before the Lord *in the spirit and power of Elijah*. The book of Malachi, the last prophetic book in the Old Testament, concludes with this statement.

Malachi 4:5, 6. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.

In Malachi, and in Isaiah and other places, it was prophesied that before the coming of the Lord, a prophet like Elijah would be sent who would prepare the way for people to turn to the Lord. This "prophet" was the very child who would be born to Zechariah and Elizabeth—John the Baptist.

Zechariah responds to the angel's announcement of blessing in this way:

1:18. . . . "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were already old, past the age at which children would be born to them. So Zechariah asked the angel, "How shall I know this?" He asked the angel for a sign, for proof that he could know for sure that this would happen. Zechariah did not just accept what he was told, but he doubted. To Zechariah's doubt, the angel replies,

1:19, 20. And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."

The angel's name was Gabriel, which means "God is my strength." The angel with such a name appeared before Zechariah to bring good news. But instead of believing, Zechariah doubted. Therefore, Gabriel gave him a "sign" by shutting his mouth so that he could not speak.

Luke, who wrote this Gospel, describes Zechariah as "righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord." (1:6) He was a righteous man in the eyes of God. The priests who served in the temple of Israel had to be

descendants of Aaron the Levite. They were chosen by hereditary succession, and they served as a mediator between God and man. Therefore, the priests also had to be familiar with the Old Testament law and they were entitled to such an education. It was a privileged education to which a priest received the rights at the time of his birth. However, even Zechariah, who in the eyes of the people was as close to God as one could possibly be, was not perfect. He doubted the direct message given to him by the angel of God.

Francis Collins is a physician and geneticist in the United States. Until recently, he was the director of the National Institutes of Health and is currently a scientific advisor to the Office of the President of the United States. He is a very gifted medical researcher, with a graduate degree in genetics. He boldly stated that he could prove various mechanisms of human disease and death. Despite having been raised by his parents in the Anglican Church and hearing the words of the Bible, he denied the existence of God and believed that God's existence was not necessary to prove scientific matters. However, as a medical doctor, he had to engage with people suffering from very rare genetic diseases. Through his interactions with them, he felt a strong inner conflict because he could not approach the reasons for people's suffering with the scientific and medical knowledge he had learned. He felt himself to be an incredibly cold person. He asked the pastor of his local church, "I have scientific and medical reasons why God does not exist, what do you think?" The pastor lent him a book, C.S. Lewis' "Mere Christianity." C.S. Lewis, too, was an atheist for a period of time, but, as an adult had come to believe in Christ. Ultimately, Collins felt that scientific and medical arguments could not answer his questions. One day when he climbed a mountain to refresh himself, he saw the beauty of a perfectly frozen waterfall. This striking image removed his final resistance to believing, resulting in his conversion the following morning. His journey with Jesus may be similar in some respects to that of Zechariah, a priest who served God but did not believe in Him!

Even a priest like Zechariah, who served God, found it difficult to believe. Belief in God does not depend on what kind of person he or she is. There is no need to think that because he is such and such a person, it is easy to believe, or because he is such and such a person, it is difficult for that person to believe in God. God asks us to believe in what He has accomplished and what He will do for us. Let us begin by believing what God says in his Word, the Bible. Spiritual fellowship with God begins by believing in Him.

Zechariah did not believe what God told him, but an angel appeared to Mary, and she did believe what was spoken to her.

1:26, 27. In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.

Verse 26 says, "in the sixth month," referring to the pregnancy of Elizabeth after the promised child was conceived between the unbelieving Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. At this time, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary. It is noted that Mary was betrothed to Joseph, who was from the family of David and lived in the city of Nazareth in Galilee.

1:28-33. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

The angel Gabriel told Mary that she had received God's grace, that she would conceive and bear a son, that the child would be named Jesus and that he would come as the true King of Jacob, or Israel. Mary was very troubled and confused at the sudden visit of the angel Gabriel and this announcement.

1:34. And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

No doubt it seemed impossible and unbelievable to Mary that she herself would give birth to a baby. First of all, the Bible does not mention Mary's age, but the cultural background of the time suggests that she was probably 12 years old when she became betrothed to Joseph. Twelve years old would have been too young, physically and emotionally, to carry a child. Secondly, Mary was engaged to Joseph, but not married. In the cultural context of the time, it took more than a year from engagement to marriage, so it is not surprising that Mary, who was not married, would find it completely impossible to give birth to a baby without having sexual relations with a man. However, the birth of the Savior through a virgin was what was prophesied in Isaiah 7:14.

1:35-38. And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

The angel Gabriel spoke gently to Mary, who was perplexed by the sudden revelation. First of all, he told her that the Holy Spirit would give her a son. Then, he told her about her

elderly relative, Elizabeth, also being pregnant. He said these things are happening because nothing is impossible with God. Mary responded, "Behold, I am the Lord's servant. Let it be done to me according to your word." She believed what the angel of the Lord, Gabriel, said.

The way Mary was treated in society was the opposite of that of Zechariah. In those days, a woman's testimony was not considered evidence in a court of law. She was like a child who had barely reached adulthood. A child was not considered a person of value in the society at that time. However, Mary believed what the angel Gabriel told her, believing it to be from God. The Bible tells us that Mary believed what Zechariah did not believe.

Sometimes I give a message during the Grace Kids time here at Grace City Church Tokyo. And I am sometimes surprised to see that even though they are all elementary school students, that is, younger than Mary was, they really believe in Jesus and what He did for them. Of course, it still takes time for them to explain in their own words what Jesus did for them, but they still believe in Him. I was in my late twenties when I believed in Jesus, so I wonder if I could have believed in Him when I was an elementary school student like them. I have a question mark in my mind. But believing in Jesus as Savior has nothing to do with age, social status, or anything like that. I, as well as everyone else who is here, should honestly believe with a childlike heart and confess that Jesus is the Savior who atoned for our sins and forgave us!

A son was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth, though they did not believe. As instructed, they named him John, and Zechariah praised God. Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and our Savior, Jesus Christ, was born. Jesus was born to be crucified to atone for the sins of the world. Let us begin the new year by praising Jesus Christ, the Savior who was born and was given to us through the faith of a woman named Mary.

Let's pray.

"Gracious and loving God, we thank you that you have invited us to believe what you have done as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Lord, you ask us first to believe. Transform us into believers and lovers of You. Give us the faith to believe in You with childlike honesty. Also, through our faith in You, make us grow into obedient followers. We offer this prayer before you in the name of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ, with sincere gratitude for the blessing of beginning this year in your Word. Amen."