

The Birth of John the Baptist

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Date: 11 December 2016

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning everyone. It is 14 days until Christmas time. As Bing Crosby said, it's beginning to feel an awful lot like Christmas. Who's excited? Put your hands up. A bit of excitement this morning. Excellent.

Here's what I want you to do. I want you to take that excitement and I want you to turn to Luke chapter 1. Take that excitement to Luke chapter 1 and we'll get into this story this morning. It's really exciting. This morning we're getting into the events that Luke describes leading up to the Christmas story.

And as Paul said, just to mix it up just a little bit, what we're going to do, instead of one sermon, we're going to have three little sermons. That terrifies you by the look of things, but we'll get there. We're going to have three mini sermons and in between each we're going to sing a carol.

And hopefully this will help us to get into this story because it is fantastic. So Luke chapter 1 and we're going to look at these characters that we've already read about, Zechariah and Elizabeth. So let's pray and let's ask for God's help as we turn to this chapter of Scripture this morning. Father, we thank you. We thank you so much for our time together this morning. And we thank you for your word.

[1 : 09] And we thank you for Christmas. And we thank you for everything that it represents to us. So, Father, we ask that this morning these perhaps familiar verses.

Father, would you help us to grasp them anew? Would you help us to see their mind-blowing significance and their meaning in your plan, your grand plan of salvation? So would you come and would you teach us by your Holy Spirit?

May he make your holy word alive to us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So I wonder what your favourite Christmas tradition is. I heard mine already from one of the children.

I couldn't remember who it is. One of my favourite Christmas tradition is the Advent calendar. I don't know if anyone else is really into Advent calendars. I must add, it's got to be chocolate. And if I'm being really expensive, it's got to be Lindor.

But we've gone for Cadbury's this year. So I love my Advent calendar. Reduced to clear at Tesco if anybody fancies coming late to the Advent party. I'm loving introducing my eldest daughter, Chloe, to the idea of an Advent calendar.

[2 : 14] And what we're doing, we're helping her opening the doors each morning. She seems to be a lot more interested in the chocolate than anything else. But she's getting into this idea of Advent as well. It's this thing we do, isn't it, as we build up to Christmas.

This thing called Advent. And it helps us count down the days to the 25th of December. The day that we've all been looking forward to. Each morning we open a door.

And then we get up the next morning, we open another door. And then we get up the next morning, we open another door. And you can feel it, can't you? That sense of excitement and anticipation. As you're counting down the days to the 25th, you see the doors fly open.

Before you know it, there you are. Your whole thing is open. And you're at the 25th. But here's what I want you to picture this morning and imagine. Imagine how you would feel, consider how you would feel, if you didn't know when the end date of your Advent calendar was.

You didn't know when that date was. What if day after day you woke and you opened your Advent calendar and you said, Is this the day? No, it's not today. And you got up the next day and you opened your calendar and you said, Is this the day?

[3 : 28] No, it's not today. And you did the same thing day after day after day. In fact, what if that waiting, it started as days? And then it turned into years.

And then it turned into 10 years. And then it turned into 100 years. And then it turned into 400 years. And you still didn't know when that day was coming.

How would you feel in the waiting? How would you feel? Because as we enter these events leading up to the first Christmas story, the Christmas morning, Luke introduces us to a people who are waiting.

They're waiting. A people who have been waiting for 400 years. It's been 400 years since God last spoke through the last of the Old Testament prophets.

Now, an awful lot has gone on in the world since then. But God speaking, not one of them. 400 years of silence.

[4 : 32] Here in Luke chapter 1 are people who are waiting on God to act. Waiting for what? For God to do what he said he would do.

And what did God say he would do? He said he would rescue his people from their enemies. And he said he would comfort his people. And he said he would be merciful to his people.

And he said he would make his people a holy people. And he said he would bring people, others, from outside our people into our people to be part of our people.

And our number would grow and grow and grow and we would worship this God in his presence together. And he said he would deal with our sin problem. But they've been waiting and they've been waiting and they've been waiting.

And that day, that day has not yet come. And all the while, here are people who are living their lives in darkness. And so Luke chapter 1, he introduces us to two people.

[5 : 38] Firstly, to a priest. Verse 5 of chapter 1. We've got it there. Zechariah. And to his wife, Elizabeth. Now this came up in little Chloe's calendar this morning.

Zechariah and Elizabeth. She, we're kind of doing the whole one syllable name thing just now. So we went for Zech and Liz. So here are Zech and Liz. Zechariah. And what are they doing? They are waiting.

And do you see how Luke describes them in that chapter? They are righteous in the things of God. They are people who are diligent in keeping God's law. They are a couple who love and who trust God.

But in their waiting and in their working, they are no doubt asking, When is our God coming? When is he coming? We've heard the prophecies.

We've had them passed down to us generation after generation after generation. We've heard the prophecies. We've heard our God. Our God, he makes promises. But will our God keep his promises?

[6 : 40] So as we pause just there, let's stand and let's sing this great carol that's going to help us, I think, just reflect a lot of those sentiments. O come, O come, Emmanuel.

Let's stand and sing this together. So here we are. Zech and Liz, they're playing the waiting game. But little do they know that God is about to shake things up in hugely unexpected ways.

And we have to say that this passage is full of the unexpected, isn't it? It's full of the unexpected.

Firstly, did you notice, do you see that there's an unexpected plan?

So here are an elderly and faithful and godly couple. But what are we told? They're unable to have a child. That can't be in the script for how they saw their lives going, can it?

I mean, that's painful. And that, in that culture, that's got to be, that is, that's shameful for them. So here are a couple wondering in their own lives, where is God in all of this?

[7 : 46] But God has his plan. For secondly, do you notice that there's an unexpected job? Zechariah, if you see it, verse 5, his day job, well, he's a priest.

And he normally serves somewhere in the Judean hills, but twice a year for one week, his division are on duty in Jerusalem at the temple. And within his division, there would have been something like 800 priests.

And we're told, Luke tells us, that Zechariah, he hits the jackpot. He's selected by, what are we told, random lot, to be the priest who tends the altar of incense.

Where is that? Well, it's right in the temple. He is going to get within feet of the most holy place, the place where God dwells.

What a privilege for Zechariah. What an honor for this man. And make no mistake, this inner temple visit would have been the absolute highlight.

[8 : 48] It would have been the absolute pinnacle of his professional career. And I just think about, in your own line of work, what is it you do day on day? What would that look like for you to reach the pinnacle?

What does it look like? Where would you go? What would you do? Who would you meet? How would you feel? Because this is Zechariah's pinnacle moment right here.

In fact, so prestigious was this honor, we're told that once you had your turn, it's likely that that was you for your lifetime.

Never again. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. And it's on this unexpected job that, thirdly, Zechariah gets an unexpected visit. So there he is.

He's in the temple. He's going about his duties. He's offering incense. There he is praying. He's probably praying for his nation. He's praying for his people.

[9 : 47] And there he encounters an angel. Verse 12, how does he react? Cute and cuddly angel? No. Verse 12, how does he feel? He is terrified. Oh, what a panic in thy bristly.

This is how he's feeling. What does this mean? What does this mean? Why are you here? What have I done? What does the angel Gabriel tell him?

Fourthly, he tells him about an unexpected boy. Now, this couple may be getting on in life, but here is Gabriel, and he's telling Zechariah, there's a child on the way for you and Elizabeth.

Now, I wonder, I was thinking about it this week. Why did God wait until Zechariah and Elizabeth were really old before he sent them a child? You wondered that as you've read this passage before, perhaps?

Why does God wait? I'm just trying to picture it this week. Imagine an aging Zechariah trying to play catch with John the Baptist in the backyard. He's old. Why is God waiting until they're old?

[10 : 55] Well, surely it's to teach them, and it's to teach us that our God is God over all, that our God, he is God who is in control, that our God is sovereign, and he's purposeful in what he does and in his ways, and our God has a plan that will unfold in his perfect timing for his glory, and for his glory alone.

And so Liz and Zech, what are we told? They're reunited, he comes home, and as they come together, here is a heavenly guarantee that Liz, against all the odds, is going to conceive.

And they're not going to have to wait to the 20-week scan to find out the gender. Do you notice that? It's a boy. And they are going to have to go through that process of trying to write down every possible name for a boy and a girl until actually the birth happens.

What is he going to be called? He's going to be called John. Verse 13. And you see, immediately we see that there's a plan and there's a purpose for this bairn. And they're not left to wonder and to think about what he's going to grow up to become.

Is he going to grow up to be a physician, do you think, Liz? Do you think he's going to grow up and he's going to be a musician? Do you think he's going to grow up and he's going to play center forward for a united?

[12 : 17] Do you see how there's a plan and there's a purpose from heaven for this boy? There's a plan. He's already been assigned his job from heaven's quarters. And do you notice the language that Gabriel uses here?

It's language from the prophet Malachi about one who will come before the day of the Lord, before he comes to his temple. And he will come in the spirit of Elijah.

That's how John is described. That is who John is going to be. And what will he do? Look at verse 17. He will prepare the way of the Lord.

And if you're on the ball, you'll notice in the surrounding verses there, the word turn used twice. Look at it there. See if you can see it. Use twice. Because that's John's role here in salvation history.

To turn people from their sin and to turn them back to the Lord their God. He's a turner. And he's going to get people sensitized.

[13 : 18] He's going to get people ready. He's going to get people prepared for the coming of Jesus. And John will be great. It sounds brilliant, doesn't it?

Verse 18. How does Zechariah react? He doubts Gabriel's message. I think specifically we're intended to understand that he wants some kind of sign.

He wants to know that God will actually do this. How does he know? And so he's temporarily sentenced to muteness. And so Zechariah, there he is. He serves the rest of his time at the temple

and then he returns home to the hill country.

He returns home to his wife. Now I would think about it this week. I love getting into passages and trying to imagine them. I'd love to have been a fly on the wall when Zechariah returned home to Elizabeth.

Would you not? Presumably she knows nothing of the fact, firstly, that he's been selected for that temple duty. And second of all, what he's actually seen when he was in the temple. Imagine that scene as they get home.

[14:22] Zechariah can't speak. I like to think that what happened as he returned to the house was the most energetic game of charades the world has ever seen. As he tries to describe, communicate to Elizabeth what he's seen and what's happened to him.

Kind of angel, baby, right? Do you see? He's trying to communicate this, but he can't. But this is what's going on in this man's life. This couple's life. God is moving and God is acting.

And so fast forward nine months or so to verse 57 and we read the actual birth of this boy. And we see fifthly to the gathering and the watching crowd at least that he's given an unexpected name. Now local custom of the day was that the son would be named after either the father or the grandfather. So the bookies favorite here for this boy is that he will be called Zechariah. And so when you can understand as Elizabeth suggests that no, no, no, he will be called John, that the surrounding crowd are puzzled and they're questioning her choice and they turn to Zechariah and what are we told?

They motion to him. Again, two-way charades here. They motion to him and they say, are you going to step in and do something about this? And Zechariah, the man who doubted as he's thought upon the things of God over the time period before the birth of his boy, as he thinks about it, what do we see?

[15:48] That he is a man who now trusts in God and his plan and he now sees what God is up to in these events, that God has come to visit his people.

And what are we told? He takes his tablet, that's where Apple got the idea from presumably, he takes his tablet and what does he write? You can feel the drama. John. His name will be John. John's name, what does it mean? The Lord is gracious. He is gracious. So fitting for what's going on here. That's exactly what Zechariah, he understands to be going on in these events.

The Advent calendar that he's been opening day after day is today the day God's going to come? No. Is today the day God's going to come? No. And now he understands that God is coming and God is going to make good on the promises that he made to his people.

That day is on the horizon. And on a side note, isn't it interesting that we're told here, Luke tells us just how much this whole episode, it grabbed the attention of their neighbors in passing.

[17:04] Do you notice that? They looked in and they looked into this couple, they looked into this house and they saw that God was up to something. They looked in and they saw that God was working in marvelous and mysterious ways.

And as they saw that the worship and the wonder that filled that household, and as they hear Zechariah now unmuted and with his tongue unloosed, praising God like he's never praised God before, what are we told at verse 65?

The people were filled with awe. And the news of what God was doing in these events, it spread wide.

It spread everywhere. Now it made me think. What do my neighbors think? As they look into my life?

As they look into our house? Or flat? Neighbors both physically up in the stairwell, yes, but neighbors, the people who we rub shoulders with every day, what do they see as they look into our lives?

[18:14] Does the joy of this couple, of this family, about what God is doing at Christmas, do I share that thrill and joy? Is that joy my joy?

Is I understand what God is doing here? And does that joy, does it spill out from me to the rest of this community? It's a big challenge for us, isn't it? I wonder how you feel as you feel that challenge this morning.

Wouldn't it be great as we look forward to next Sunday or our Christmas events? Wouldn't it be fantastic if we all took the opportunity to try and share something this week? Share something, just maybe to one or two people share something, maybe share an invite, but particularly share

something of the joy of what Christmas means to you?

I was really challenged on that this week. How often do I just never think about that? Here are a couple and they are filled with joy. Here is Zechariah filled with joy.

His tongue loosened to employ the praises of his God. Why? Why? Because God makes promises and God keeps promises and prays him that that is true.

[19 : 25] So let's stand once more. This is the last hymn of this section here. Let's stand once more and let's sing this great Charles Wesley hymn that picks up in a lot of these things. Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free.

Let's stand and sing this together. And we've already thought about the fact that so much of this account here in Luke chapter 1 is unexpected.

Unexpected. But as we come to verse 68, we actually see that everything that is happening here, everything that is going down, is going down exactly as God said it would go down.

We might look at this and think everything is unexpected, but actually as we look beyond and above, everything is going down as expected. Why?

Because God makes promises and God keeps his promises. And it's here as we read of Zechariah's, his spirit-filled, burst into praise, that we begin to see the true significance of what is unfolding here, of what is happening.

[20 : 37] Now, what is he praising God for in these verses? Scan your eyes over it. What is he praising God for? What does he understand that God is doing in these events in his life, in the life of his people?

I think the big theme of his prophecy, his words of praise, is salvation. You'll see him mention it in verse 69, that God has raised up a horn of salvation.

That's language representative of God raising up a strong king who's going to rule and reign for his people. Again, at verse 71, what does he speak of? Salvation from our enemies.

And then verse 77, Zechariah's son, what will he be? Well, he will be the one who will give the people knowledge of what? God's salvation. Zechariah is, he's singing about salvation.

salvation. Zechariah is praising God that he is coming to save his people. After years of silence, years of silence, God is visiting his people again and that is cause for copious amounts of rejoicing.

[21 : 58] And as you follow his words, there appear to be two aspects to this salvation. It's salvation from something and it's salvation for something.

From something and for something. Notice it. Firstly, God is coming to save his people, to redeem his people from their enemies. It's Exodus language that Zechariah is using here.

That's what's happening. It's the language of rescue and deliverance, redemption. It's the language of the slave market, of buying, paying a price and buying somebody back.

And I think ultimately it's speaking about the great rescue that God will do, the great deliverance that God will win for his people over their great spiritual enemy, their sin and their separation from God.

And you'll notice that Zechariah, he sees this event not as a random birth, not as a something that's happened out of the blue, but he sees it as the very fulfillment of what God had promised and God had said he would do.

[23 : 08] So here do you notice that Zechariah, he's looking back down the corridors of time and he's connecting the events, sorry, the ancient promises that God made. He's connecting them with what he's seeing playing out in front of him, especially the ancient promises made to David and to Abraham.

That God would send a rescuer. That God would send a mighty king. That God would send one who would bring blessing to the nations and he would do it through one of their descendants.

And so he's connecting that with these events. Zechariah is celebrating the truth that should thrill us this morning, that our God, he makes promises and that our God keeps his promises.

And do you notice that Zechariah clarifies the express purpose of this rescue mission? God is coming to make a way for his people to be saved from their sin and save them for a life of obedience and worship with him.

Second half of verse 74, look at it there. God saves, what does he say? To enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness where?

[24 : 30] Before him all are days. Now there is the cry of a heart that has been electrified by God's word and by God's truth.

And is that not a wonderful truth if we think about it in our Christian lives? The purpose of the gospel, what God was doing? That he hasn't just saved us from our sin and let us loose to wander around life aimlessly.

that he saved us in order that we might have and live in fellowship with him. Knowing him as our God and knowing him as our King, Lord, and Savior.

To live the life that we were designed to live with the one who designed us in the first place. That is what salvation is all about.

That God is coming to save his people. the answer to the darkness is that the light is coming from heaven.

[25 : 29] The answer to the captivity is that the rescuer is coming from heaven. Christmas is all about the gospel. All about the gospel.

That the baby in the manger, get your heads around the incarnation by the way, I still can't get my head around it. The baby in the manger, God in the flesh, the creator of all in a crib, came to be the king who would go to the cross.

And what would he do there? He would reconcile all those who believe and trust in him to their gods. It was Charles Spurgeon who famously said that Jesus may well be the cause of the greatest division, but he is also the cause, the medium of the greatest union.

This is what God is doing here. He is reconciling God and man. And you see how it's a wonder for Zechariah that his son John will go before Mary's boy and get the stage ready for him so that when he appears, what's he going to do?

He's just going to shine the spotlight on him and say, don't look at me, don't look at me, don't look at you, look at him. Come to him. Come to him and repent of your sin.

[26 : 58] Be forgiven through him and have life in him. John really is the great preparer. The one who will say, come and look at Jesus.

Praise him, says Zechariah. Praise our God that he makes promises and he keeps promises. And so as we leave Zech and Liz this morning, let me just ask you two questions.

Two questions I think were challenged from this passage. First of all, how are we waiting? How are we waiting? These two individuals here in Luke 1, they might at first glance seem so irrelevant to us.

But when you think about it, what an example they are of what it means to wait well. Here they are waiting for the first coming of Christ.

Trusting and hoping and clinging in the midst of their doubts and questions, trusting God's words and living by faith in what God has said to be true rather than what they can see around them.

[28 : 11] You know, we might not be waiting for the first coming of Christ anymore, as we celebrate his coming. But here we are today and we're waiting for his second coming.

When this mighty king, the Lord Jesus Christ, will return, this time not as a helpless babe, but this time will return as a mighty king who will judge and who will win.

And so the question I think from this passage for us is, are we waiting like Zech and Liz? How are we waiting this morning? And secondly, as we gaze upon the joy of these two individuals, I think Luke quite purposefully asks us his readers, have you entered into this joy?

The joy alone that God can give? Do you see, do you understand what cause for celebration this baby in the manger was going to be?

Do you see that the hopes and fears of all the years really were met in Bethlehem that night? Do you see the one who gives joy?

[29 : 23] Have you entered into the joy this morning of knowing the salvation that God offers Christmas time in his son Jesus Christ? Do you know the joy of sins forgiven?

Do you know the joy of conscience cleansed? Do you know life to the full? Life that is found in this baby in the manger?

What is Luke saying to us here? Come and enter into the joy of knowing this baby in the manger as your king, as your saviour, and as your lord. And praise him, praise him eternally that our God, he makes promises, and our God, he keeps his promises.

The chorus of the great carol we sang earlier, joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her king, let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and heaven and nature sing.

What we're going to do just before we pray and close and stand to sing our last song, let's just have a time of quiet. We're so busy, aren't we, running around and we'll run around upstairs at the lunch. Let's just use this time just to be quiet and let's come before our Lord and our king and our saviour this morning before we pray.

[30 : 56] And so gracious father, we thank you for this morning. And we thank you as we look at Luke chapter one, that we see in glorious technicolor that you are a God who makes promises, and you are a God who keeps his promises.

And we remember at this time of year, this Christmas time of year, that you are a God who has acted to save his people from their sin, from their darkness, and to the light, and to yourself. So would you help us at this Christmas time to rejoice, to rejoice, to rejoice, and what it means to be your people. Oh, Father, help us to marvel at the Christ. Help us to wait well. Help us to love you, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen.