

Bridging The Old and New Testaments

John

Because you all know stories from the New Testament, as you listened to the reading of God's Word from Luke it was easy to know it was about the coming of John the Baptist. What you might not know is this is also the fulfillment of the prophecy given to Malachi, the last prophet from the Old Covenant or Testament written about 450 B.C. At the time of Luke's writing God has been silent for over 400 years. There had been no prophets or direction from God in over 400 years – people were not use to God being silent for so long. I do not know about you, but I can become frustrated at times when my prayers are not readily answered. Then I pray for patience, which can be difficult because I want God to give me an answer. Joyce had patience and prayed to God for him to save me for a number of years and I praise God she did not give up. Just think of the number of Hebrew people waiting on the one true God to speak and having no prophet speaking for God in over 400 years. How hopeless many may have been, how their faith was being tested. Indeed many had fallen away from faith and many ungodly practices had come into God's chosen people.

Let's look at the prophecy given to Malachi from God, I will read a small part of that prophecy, fulfilled in Luke's account in chapter 1. Reading the part that promises the coming of God's messenger to herald the arrival of the Messiah. Malachi chapter 3 verse 1, "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts." Now after 400 years this long awaited messenger is announced to a priest in the temple. This morning we will see this prophecy being fulfilled and the coming of the last

prophet of the Old Testament by the first supernatural message from God in 400 years. John, who will become known as John the Baptist and he will be the one who connects or bridges the Old and New Testaments.

Herod

Turn in your Bibles to where Luke, the careful historian, begins in verse 5, “[In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah \(dzakh-ar-ee-as\) ...](#)” Here is the problem before me this morning – I can give you the big picture and move on or take the time to give you background and fill in the details behind the story Luke is telling. If you had lived at the time of Luke’s writing you would know many of the details because you would have lived during this story. I also admit I enjoy history and trivia – sometimes to the benefit of those I share with, sometimes to their amusement and sometimes to their frustration. I hope this morning the background and details I share with you will be for your benefit, giving a fuller and richer picture and possibly some amusement but I hope not to your frustration.

Luke sets the time frame saying “[In the days of Herod.](#)” We need to understand whom this Herod is and about this Herod’s background in order to understand the time and society both John and Jesus were being born into.

Herod ruled from 37 B.C. to 4 A.D., but where did he come from, for he was not a Jew, yet he ruled Judea? Herod’s father Antipater had served under Julius Caesar in the war against Pompey. After the war Caesar made Antipater procurator or governor of Judea. When Herod was only 25 his father appointed him as the governor of Galilee. Galilee was experiencing problems with robbers and many of the roads were not safe. Herod immediately began capturing and executing the robbers and this gained him favor with his father, the Romans and the people. After Antipater’s death Herod, who had gone to Rome, was called back and made king of Judea by Octavian in 40 B.C. With the aid of the Roman army Herod drove out the Parthians who had

occupied areas of Palestine by 37 B.C. and with their removal Herod ruled uninterrupted until 4 A.D. Herod was not a Jew but an Edomite and a descendant of Esau, which were enemies of Israel as described in Numbers 20, 1 Kings 11 and 2 Kings 14.

To advance his position and solidify his power Herod worked at gaining the peoples support by marrying Mariamne a member of a wealthy and politically powerful Jewish family. He also began a number of public works programs which included the rebuilding of the temple and building the port city of Caesarea where later the apostle Paul would be imprisoned at the Roman garrison for 2 years with Luke as his companion. These works made him so popular in his early reign that some of the wealthy and influential Jewish families formed the political party known as the Herodians as referred to in Matthew 22 and Mark 3 & 12.

However, once Herod had solidified his power he became known for his cruelty. He murdered his wife, her mother and brother, and several of his own sons. Because of his fear of being overthrown Herod's savagery grew to know no bounds for we read in Matthew's gospel account that in 2 A.D., "Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ 'A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.' " (Matthew 2:16-18) This fulfilled what the prophet Jeremiah wrote 600 hundred years earlier. Now that we have a better understanding of Herod we turn to the priest Zechariah.

Zechariah

Please return to Luke at verse 5, "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah (ab·ee·ah). 'And he had a wife from

the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.” Zechariah’s name means “Yahweh has remembered” which we will see is true in our story this morning. As a priest Zechariah served in the town of Hebron, named after Abraham the Hebrew, by teaching and interpreting Scripture and he also counseled people. When there was a disagreement he acted as judge. It was the sacred duty of priests to bring the people to God by offering sacrifices for their sins.

King David and priest Ahimelech (**akh-ee-meh-lek**) who resided over the tabernacle developed 24 divisions of the priesthood. The 8th division was the priests of Abijah, pronounced **ab-ee-ah**. Abijah was the son and successor to Rehoboam to the throne of Judah in 913 B.C. and he reigned only 2 years. The 8th division of the priesthood was named after him and each priestly division served at the temple for 2 weeks twice a year.

By Zechariah choosing Elizabeth as his wife he elevated his status because she was from the line of Aaron and named after Aaron’s wife. By the way here is some trivia – we have modernized many of the names in the Bible, Elizabeth’s name, in Hebrew was *Elisabet* (**el-ee-sab-et**) meaning “Oath of God”. Elizabeth had a high standing as one born into the high priestly family of Aaron and according Exodus all qualified male descendants of Aaron were to serve as priests, this meant that Elizabeth’s father, brothers and cousins were priests. Furthermore, Luke is careful to note that not only was Zechariah a priest and married to Elizabeth a daughter of Aaron but they were above reproach, they were according to verse 6, “walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.” The fact that they lived blameless before the Lord does not mean they did not sin. What Luke is telling us is that they lived lives obedient to God and his law. One could say they were like Job, reading in chapter 1, verse 1 Job was “was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away

from evil.” Some people would have argued that Zechariah and Elizabeth could not have been righteous before God because they had remained childless. It was generally assumed at that time that it was the woman’s fault for not being able to bear children. So, the thought by many would have been that God had withheld his blessings on Zechariah and especially Elizabeth because of some sin. Not only did the people who knew them feel God had not blessed Zechariah and Elizabeth but they themselves felt as a couple they were beyond all hope for Elizabeth was now past child bearing years. Being advanced in years as verse 7 says would give us the impression that Elizabeth may well have gone through menopause and physically it was no longer humanly possible to bear children.

Now we come to where Zechariah is chosen to enter the holy place of the temple in verse 8. There were a number of duties the priests performed. The most precious was to enter into the holy place and light the incense. The casting of lots chose this honor because there were far too many priests for everyone to get an opportunity. Some priests were never chosen. Zechariah was honored to be chosen to enter the holy place to remove the ashes on the golden altar from the lighting 12 hours earlier and he would have brought in a pan filled with hot burning coals taken from the altar of burnt offering and placed them on the golden altar and then sprinkled incense on the hot coals. As the smoke ascended he would make intercessory prayer to the Lord for the people - prayers for their repentance, for God to remove the Romans and most importantly for the coming messiah. This burning of the incense will happen again in the future. Reading from The Revelation of Jesus Christ given to John, “When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

² Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. ³ And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, ⁴ and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose

before God from the hand of the angel.” (Revelation 8:1-4) This is what Zechariah was doing as a symbol of the eternal reign of the Messiah. The multitude of priests and people gathered outside praying for Zechariah would indicate that this was the greater attended evening service. However, this would not be the normal ritual of incense and prayer.

Gabriel

God once again intervenes with mankind to further his plan of redemption. The last appearance of an angel had been to the “prophet” Zechariah nearly 500 years earlier. The prophet Zechariah saw the angel in a series of visions, but here the priest Zechariah, chosen by God, saw the angel with his physical eyes. In verse 11 we read the “angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.” The angel was present with Zechariah, so his response is understandable, he “was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.” There was similar response when the angel Gabriel appeared to Daniel and he responded, “I was frightened and fell on my face. But he *Gabriel* said to me, ‘Understand, O son of man, that the vision is for the time of the end.’”¹⁸ And when he had spoken to me, I fell into a deep sleep with my face to the ground. But he touched me and made me stand up.” (Daniel 8:17-18) One would be made painfully aware of their sins in the presence of such a holy being as the angel Gabriel and knowing God’s judgment of sin and not having yet the foretold Messiah to atone for sin. However, Gabriel came to deliver a message of blessing.

Knowing Zechariah’s fear the angel says in verse 13, “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 prayer had been heard, what prayer? He had given up on the hope of having a child. He was in the holy place praying for the people and their deliverance by the long awaited Messiah. This is the prayer God was now answering! In addition, Elizabeth will become pregnant. He will soon see his lost

hope fulfilled and his son, John, will herald the arrival of the Messiah. Here is a little more trivia, names had great importance and their meaning was important in ancient times. God chose the name Ioannes and John is the Greek version of the Hebrew name, *Ioannes* pronounced ee·o·an·nace and means “Jehovah is a gracious giver”. Today we name our children for many reasons but the meaning of the name is not often taken into consideration.

Zechariah’s response of awe and fear was normal, but he also responds with doubt and questions the angel saying in verse 18, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” Here standing before him is an angel from God and he doubts and his doubt is evidence that even though Zechariah was considered blameless before God he was not a man without sin. To question God is sin. Gabriel shows patience and answers, “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.” There are only 2 angels in the Bible that we know by name, Michael the archangel and Gabriel God’s messenger. The phrase Gabriel used was “to bring you this good news” here he is referring to John who would herald the news that the Messiah had come but it also refers to the gospel of Jesus Christ that we are to give the world – now we are to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the world through which the world may be saved.

Although this was the greatest news to come into the history of the world Zechariah would not be able to communicate it well to others because of his doubt. Gabriel tells Zechariah because he doubted God’s messenger and message, in verse 20 we read, “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.” We are not sure how long it was until Elizabeth became pregnant, but Zechariah was silent until that time and for 9 months until John was born and until on the 8th day when John was circumcised. Zechariah had been silent for over 9 months and at the circumcision the discussion began concerning what name the baby was to be given. Further along in

Luke's account we read in verses 63 and 64, Zechariah "asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God." Prior to this moment Zechariah would not have been able to explain what had happened in the temple well. Many probably thought this was another punishment by God for sin in his life. This time they were right, but the punishment was not permanent and he speaks of God and his blessings.

Closing

Now, back to the evening in the temple of Zechariah's service. The crowd outside would have become concerned. Normally the priest entered the holy place, performed his duty of removing the old ashes and placing the new hot coals and incense on the golden altar, then he prayed for a few minutes and came out. Zechariah had stayed much longer than normal and people were concerned.

Many of us have heard the stories about how a rope was tied around the ankle of the high priest so if something happened, like a heart attack, they could drag him out. There is no evidence in the Bible or historical Jewish documents to give credence to this story. However, from Exodus we know that the robe worn by the High Priest had "bells of pure gold, and put the bells between the pomegranates all around the hem of the robe." (Exodus 39:25) Once a year when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies they would have heard him move. The problem was the Zechariah was not a High Priest and he was not in the Holy of Holies, so there would have been silence and those outside would not know what was happening on the inside. They would have been worrying about what was causing the delay. When he came out they sensed from his appearance and because he could not speak that he had seen a vision from God. The ancient world was more attuned to the fact that there is a spiritual world surrounding our physical world that was equally as real.

Luke ends this part of the story with Elizabeth conceiving and being in seclusion for 5 months. Elizabeth most likely did not speak of her pregnancy until she began to physically show. If she told people they might not have believed her because of her advanced age and she had been barren for so long. However, once she began to show her pregnancy people would have had to accept and wonder how she was able to conceive.

What are we to take away from this morning and Luke's teaching? First, when it concerns God's plan for salvation or his miracles and the gift of an old man and woman conceiving we need to understand God's plans will be fulfilled in his timing not man's. Second, we are to learn from Zechariah to not doubt God, but to live faithful lives living out the precious gospel of Christ. Finally, as Paul instructed the believers in Ephesus and is true for us this day we are to preach the saving gospel of good news. Reading from Ephesians 3, Paul says, ⁸“*To me and this is true for all of us as well, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,*” ⁹and to bring to light for **everyone** what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰**so that through the church** *which is you and me* the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.”

(Ephesians 3:8-12)

The question before each of us, “Will we be faithful to live the gospel of Christ and beyond living, preach the gospel of Christ as Paul wrote to everyone the mystery of God now reveal in Jesus Christ?” My beloved, we are to go out from here into the world and preach Christ who rose from the dead so that all who believe may live with God forever. Amen!