

## Dark Christmas "Removing the Darkness of Disgrace" Luke 1:5-25

### Introduction

- [Slide #1] Generally speaking, the world is divided into two camps. Those who struggle through life and those who don't. For some life is painfully easy, a breeze, a cakewalk and all the other clichés you can think of. For others life is hard. Period. Always a titanic struggle. Scratching, clawing, fighting to make sense of a seemingly unfair existence. Of the two, camp easy street and camp struggle, the Christmas story has more in common with which camp? Camp struggle. And it's not even close.

### Transition

Turn with me to Luke 1. Verse 5.

- *In the time of Herod king of Judea (think megalomaniac puppet dictator king,) there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.*
- This couple, one a priest, the other a descendent of priests, Mr. and Mrs. goody-two-shoes, as [verse 6](#) says, *both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly*, this couple lived and breathed and worked and toiled in the shadow of Herod, the Mega Mind super villain of Palestine. This faithful couple, who did all the right things, who made all the right choices, who said all the right words, who minded their own business and stayed out of trouble, they don't sail through life easy breezy. They're tenants #1 and #2 in apartment #1a of camp struggle. [Verse 7](#). *But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.*
- The Christmas story, the story we love and cherish and celebrate and sing about and romanticize, doesn't begin with the peaceful idealism of a Thomas Kinkaid painting or the simple innocence of a Norman Rockwell Christmas—everything neat and tidy, perfectly in its place. The Christmas story begins with a husband and wife mired in the darkness of camp struggle. They are barren. They are aged. And they are alone.
- When we read about Elizabeth being barren we are to read into this stigma, pain, sadness, shame and societal disgrace. People believed childlessness was curse from God. In Zechariah's world he shows up to the priestly locker-room to change and the other priests are snickering and joking. "What's wrong with that guy that he can't have kids? What'd he do to God?"

- Elizabeth goes to the market and instead of reading the tabloids at the checkout line she is the tabloid. “There goes Elizabeth. Husband’s a righteous priest and they still can’t have kids. What’d she do to get on God’s bad side? Must be cursed.” There is no in vitro fertilization as recourse. No Clomid prescriptions from a fertility specialist. Together they are sterile with no hope of anything different.
- “Barrenness in the Bible is an image of lifelessness, where God’s redemptive blessing is absent.”<sup>1</sup> Far from living the Disney life, Zechariah and Elizabeth lived their entire married life under a cloud of disgrace; God’s blessing gone AWOL. Ever felt like that? God’s hand of blessing has withdrawn? Ever felt like life itself was barren? Ever lived with shame or disgrace? Like you’ve got a big red “A” emblazoned on your chest? Either self-inflicted or undeserved? Then you may have more in common with Zechariah and Elizabeth than you first thought.

### Transition

Back to the text. It’s with this backdrop to the drama that God begins to crack the light of his grace on Dark Christmas. Look at [verse 8](#).

- *Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.*
- There were twenty-four divisions of priests servicing the temple in Jerusalem. That means Zechariah’s one of 18,000 priests.<sup>2</sup> If you’re a priest you’re not serving everyday. You wait your turn. You wait for your division to be on duty; each division would service the temple twice a year, a week at a time.<sup>3</sup> There were morning and evening sacrifices or 28 slots, 28 opportunities for service per year per division. In other words, Zechariah’s one of 750 priests in his division, the division of Abijah, hoping his number’s called for one of the 28 slots.
- How do you pick the priest who serves? With that many people to choose from you draw straws. Lots were cast Luke says. The Vegas odds on Zechariah being chosen to light the incense for one of the services, either the morning or evening sacrifice? He’s got a 1 in 53 chance. Is long shot even the right way to describe his chances?
- Luke tells us in [verse 9](#) the lot fell on Zechariah; he got his chance. This moment of going into the Holy Place, the place right outside the Holy of

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Bock, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> Osborne, p.2

Holies, to light incense was the highlight of his career as a priest; it's the most sacred moment of Zechariah's life.

- The crowd has gathered—they're outside praying [verse 10](#) says. The lot is cast. It's Zechariah; the childless priest with the cloud of disgrace hanging over his head. The crowd murmurs at the choice. What could this mean? Zechariah, nervous and excited, prepares himself to go in. Sweat's running down his forehead. Hands trembling. Mouth dry. Butterflies churning. He goes in to do what's been done a million times before.
- *Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. [Verse 11](#).*
- Can you even imagine? Zechariah in the Holy Place. The vaulted ceiling. The glow of light reflecting off the gilded walls from the golden lamp stand. The showbread in front of him. The people outside praying for this moment. Zechariah inside praying, trembling. And as he reaches out to light the altar of incense, the symbol of the people's intercessory prayers rising up to God, at that moment God acts for his people.<sup>4</sup> The angel is there with an announcement.
- And not just any angel. No chubby baby with rosy cheeks and curly hair. It's Gabriel, the warrior angel, the one whose name means mighty man of God; the angel who stands in the presence of God. *When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.*
- *13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. 16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*
- After the shock and awe, after the initial wave of fear subsided, what do you think ran through Zechariah's mind? Did he have flashbacks of the patriarch Abraham? Abraham and Sarah, childless, old like him. Like Elizabeth. God visited them; made a covenant with Abraham to bless the nations through their child of promise Isaac. Did Zechariah connect the dots and catch the similarities? Was their son God's signal of another covenant coming?

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<sup>4</sup> Bock, p. 79.

- Or, did he recognize that Gabriel's words were basically a rephrasing of the last words of the Old Testament? **Malachi 4:5-6**? *"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.*
- Which was more exciting to Zechariah? That he was actually going to have a son? Finally? At his age? Or hearing Gabriel's words that the Lord himself was going to visit his people, **verse 17**, and that his future son was going to be a second Elijah and prepare the way for the Lord himself?
- Did this mean the time for the Messiah's arrival had come? For years and years and years people had waited the Messiah. **Luke 2:38** says that many were looking forward to the Messiah and the redemption of Israel. Had God finally remembered his people? And was his boy John the one to announce the Messiah's coming?
- This is staggering news; the kind that crashes Twitter's servers and brings down mainframes. And there Zechariah is, alone, in the Holy Place, with an angel. And the people are outside wondering what in the world is taking so long? Why hasn't Zechariah come out to pronounce the priestly blessing? **Verse 21**. *Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. Did God finally do him in and strike him dead? They have no idea.*
- And when Zechariah finally does come out; he can't even tell them the news. His disbelief, his asking for a sign leads to an angelic rebuke with a temporary consequence. *The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."* Zechariah's unable to speak or hear, **verse 62** says, until Gabriel's words come to pass and John is born.
- In the meantime, its hand gestures, grunts, and note scribbling and the recognition by everyone that God didn't forget Zechariah or the nation. And that he spoke to a man, Zechariah, whose name means Yahweh has remembered. God's 400 year silence has ended. His Spirit is at work again. Something truly significant has happened. Jerusalem would have been buzzing for days in the afterglow of Zechariah's encounter with Gabriel.
- For Zechariah, what does normal look like after this? What does he feel like knowing this black cloud that has hung over his marriage is about to dissipate? How does he concentrate and go about his routine and finish his work? **Verse 23** says his week of service hadn't come to an end yet. Elizabeth doesn't even know. She's at home. What does he tell Elizabeth when he gets home? "Honey, I'm home. You'll never guess what

happened at the office today." What does she say in response? Will she believe him when he tries to tell her? How will their lives change once the baby comes?

- When [Zechariah's] time of service was completed, he returned home. 24 After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. Listen to Elizabeth's tender words in [verse 25](#); an incredible testimony to the essence, the nature of God's character. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."
- The only thing that can clean and wash away disgrace is more grace. God takes away this couple's disgrace with his favor, his grace. Their son's name, John, means Yahweh will be gracious. How beautiful is that?
- I want you to pause and think of those things that you are absolutely sure have caused God to withdraw his hand of blessing from your life. The addiction that just won't quit. The subtle bending of truths that effortlessly gush from your lips. Maybe the source of your shame is sleeping around. Or the abuse from when you were a kid. The petty theft. Or that great producer of shame, pornography. You got it? You got a handle on the source of your barrenness, the cause of your shame?
- What makes you think God's tender desire to be gracious to you is any less than what he did for Elizabeth and Zechariah? He met that couple in their disgrace and he will meet you in yours. The only way to be freed from the disgrace you feel is for you to receive more of his grace, more of his undeserved favor.
- And that's what Christmas is all about; God shining the light of Christ on the blackness and shame of our sin. It's about His undeserved love and favor showered on us through Jesus so that the person who trusts in [Christ] will never be put to shame, [Romans 9:33](#). And should you doubt God's promise of favor for you, should your faith waver so that you need a sign to help your unbelief like Zechariah. Then look to the cross. There's your sign. And then you rest in the cross. Free.

## Conclusion

- Do you want to see the kind of response God desires from someone He's freed from shame and disgrace? It's Zechariah's prayer to God at the birth of his son John. [Luke 1:68-79](#). Make this your prayer.
- <sup>68</sup> "Praise the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has visited and redeemed his people.  
<sup>69</sup> He has sent us a mighty Savior  
from the royal line of his servant David,  
<sup>70</sup> just as he promised

*through his holy prophets long ago.*

*71 Now we will be saved from our enemies  
and from all who hate us.*

*72 He has been merciful to our ancestors  
by remembering his sacred covenant—*

*73 the covenant he swore with an oath  
to our ancestor Abraham.*

*74 We have been rescued from our enemies  
so we can serve God without fear,*

*75 in holiness and righteousness  
for as long as we live.*

– *76 “And you, my little son,  
will be called the prophet of the Most High,  
because you will prepare the way for the Lord.*

*77 You will tell his people how to find salvation  
through forgiveness of their sins.*

*78 Because of God’s tender mercy,  
the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us,*

*79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
and to guide us to the path of peace.”*