

**Luke 1: 5-25, 57-80** – (adapted from *The Voice translation*) – To understand the life of Jesus, I must first give you some background history, events that occurred when Herod ruled Judea for the Roman Empire. Zacharias was serving as a priest in the temple in Jerusalem those days as his fathers had before him. He was a member of the priestly division of Abijah (a grandson of Aaron who innovated temple practices), and his wife, Elizabeth, was of the priestly lineage of Aaron, Moses' brother. They were good and just people in God's sight, walking with integrity in the Lord's ways and laws. Yet they had this sadness. Due to Elizabeth's infertility, they were childless, and at this time, they were both quite old – well past normal childbearing years.

One day, Zacharias was chosen to perform his priestly duties in God's presence, according to the temple's normal schedule and routine. He had been selected from all the priests by the customary procedure of casting lots for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to enter the sacred precincts of the temple. There he burned sweet incense, while outside a large crowd of people prayed. Suddenly Zacharias realized he was not alone: a messenger of the Lord was there with him. The messenger stood just to the right of the altar of incense. Zacharias was shocked and afraid, but the messenger reassured him: *“Zacharias, calm down! Don't be afraid! Zacharias, your prayers have been heard. Your wife is going to have a son, and you will name him John. He will bring you great joy and happiness – and many will share your joy at John's birth.*

*“This son of yours will be a great man in God's sight. He will not drink alcohol in any form; instead of alcoholic spirits, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the time he is in his mother's womb. Here is his mission: he will turn many of the children of Israel around to follow the path to the Lord their God. Do you remember the prophecy about someone to come in the spirit and power of the prophet Elijah: someone who will turn the hearts of the parents back to their children; someone who will turn the hearts of the disobedient to the mind-set of the just and good? Your son is the one who will fulfill this prophecy: he will be the Lord's forerunner, the one who will prepare the people and make them ready for God.”*

Zacharias replied to the messenger: “How can I be sure of what you're telling me? I am an old man, and my wife is far past the normal age for women to bear children. This is hard to believe!”

The Messenger replied sternly: *“I am Gabriel, the messenger who inhabits God's presence. I was sent here to talk with you and bring you this good news. Because you didn't believe my message, you will not be able to talk – not another word – until you experience the fulfillment of my words.”*

Meanwhile the crowd at the temple wondered why Zacharias hadn't come out of the sanctuary yet. It wasn't normal for the priest to be delayed so long. When at last he came out, he was making signs with his hands to give the blessing, but he couldn't speak. They realized he had seen some sort of vision. When his time on duty at the temple came to an end, he went back home to his wife. Shortly after his return, Elizabeth became pregnant. She avoided public contact for the next five months. Elizabeth exclaimed: “I have lived with the disgrace of being barren for all these years. Now God has looked on me with favor. When I go out in public with my baby, I will not be disgraced any longer.

When the time was right, Elizabeth gave birth to a son. News about the Lord's special kindness to her had spread through her extended family and the community. Everyone shared her joy, for after all these years of infertility, she had a son! As was customary, eight days after the baby's birth the time came for his circumcision and naming. Everyone assumed he would be

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named Zacharias, like his father. Elizabeth disagreed, saying, “No. We will name him John. Her relatives protested: “That name is found nowhere in your family.” They turned to Zacharias and asked him what he wanted the baby’s name to be. He motioned for a tablet, and he wrote, “His name is John.” Everyone was shocked by this breach of family custom. They were even more surprised when, at that moment, Zacharias was able to talk again, and he shouted out praises to God. A sense of reverence spread through the whole community. In fact, this story was spread throughout the hilly countryside of Judea. People were certain that God’s hand was on this child, and they wondered what sort of person John would turn out to be when he became a man.

When Zacharias’s voice was restored to him, he sang from the fullness of the Spirit a prophetic blessing.

*May the Lord God of Israel be blessed indeed!  
For God’s intervention has begun,  
And He has moved to rescue us, the people of God.  
And the Lord has raised up a powerful sign of liberation for us  
From among the descendants of God’s servant, King David.  
As was prophesied through the mouths of His holy prophets in ancient times:  
God will liberate us from our enemies and from the hand of our oppressors!  
God will show mercy promised to our ancestors,  
Upholding the abiding covenant He made with them,  
Remembering the original vow He swore to Abraham, from whom we are all descended.  
God will rescue us from the grasp of our enemies  
So that we may serve Him without fear all our days  
In holiness and justice, in the presence of the Lord.  
And you, my son, will be called the prophet of the Most High.  
For you will be the one to prepare the way for the Lord!  
So that the Lord’s people will receive knowledge of their freedom  
Through the forgiveness of their sins.  
All this will flow from the kind and compassionate mercy of our God.  
A new day is dawning: the Sunrise from the heavens  
Will break through in our darkness, and those who huddle in night,  
Those who sit in the shadow of death,  
Will be able to rise and walk in the light, guided in the pathway of peace.*

And John grew up and became strong in spirit. He lived in the wilderness, outside the cities until the day came for him to step into the public eye in Israel.

### Make Ready a People: More Hope

It was just another day at the temple for Zacharias. It was his priestly turn to make sure everything was done properly and in good order. But it turned into something quite different when an angel showed up at the altar! *Have you ever had a moment in your life after which you knew nothing would ever be the same?* Actually, I think we all had a moment like that this morning as we witnessed Rick LaBend portraying the angel Gabriel!! For me, the box in which my mind kept a vision of what an angel would be like was blown wide open this morning. So, I am now encountering a whole host (get it?) of new possibilities of what God’s messengers are like! Is it

possible that there are *Angels among us* all of the time, and we just fail to recognize them, and listen to their message?

There is a reason that most angels start their conversations with us saying, “Do not be afraid.” The angel appearance is the in-breaking of the divine in the midst of our ordinary lives! As will become a common theme in Luke’s gospel, the appearance of an angel in the first chapter signals that this is an extraordinary story of divine events, and yet it is set in the midst of very ordinary people.

The English word “angel” comes from the Latin *angelus* derived from the Greek translation. The term initially only pointed to a function – that of a messenger. But gradually “angel” came to signify a name for a class of “beings” existing between God and humanity ... remember how Psalm 8 states that God has created humans a little lower than the angels? The Old and New Testaments are filled with stories about angels – messengers sent from God – encountering human beings! “Do not be afraid,” they so often say, most likely to frightened and shaky humans.

The angel Gabriel had come to tell Zacharias that indeed, he, and his soon to be growing family, would have integral roles in preparing the humanity to receive the long-awaited messiah. The people of Israel had hoped and waited, and waited and hoped for the fulfillment of the prophecy for generations...for centuries. **Waiting signifies passivity. HOPE denotes actively engaging in creating an environment hospitable to positive change, rather than living in fear of change.** The angel came to deliver a message to Zacharias which was cradled in a calling. The angel was intentionally renewing a HOPE that had all but dwindled, that God would save the people by sending a messiah. And now Zacharias, Elizabeth, and soon-to-be-born John the Baptist were being called to prepare the people for receiving, following, and believing in the coming messiah. Their lives would never be the same again. They had received a life-altering message. Living into this message would inspire more HOPE for all who encountered the fulfillment of a plan of redemption, salvation, and LOVE incarnate.

The culture into which this message was delivered was one of desperation. There was tyrannical rule, oppression, violence, economic disparity, slavery, ethnic cleansing, racial and gender bias, lack of education, and the list could go on. I cannot help but to believe that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world still yearns today deliverance, redemption, salvation, and LOVE incarnate that can only come from a messiah. We need to see and hear again the angel’s message from God: “Do not be afraid! Your prayers have been heard! This is what will happen....” I HOPE to recognize those angels among us, delivering a message that may be so much more than I could have ever anticipated, and that continues to call me, and calls us, to claim the power God has given us to make a difference, to help shift circumstances, and not be paralyzed by fear any longer.

Do not be afraid to set out and to fulfill what God is calling you to do and be. Do not be afraid to confront those who would cause harm, those who sow seeds of division within the community, those who perpetuate fear. Do not be afraid to take God’s message out to a world so desperate for a divine source of HOPE, PEACE, JOY, and LOVE. We live in a time when we are exposed to much information that causes fear and anxiety. “Flying in the face of fear” – to use an angelic metaphor – means putting out information to counteract the pervasive message of fear by spreading the GOOD NEWS message to a growing sphere of influence.

So, the season of Advent into which we step this day, is not an invitation to a long winter’s nap while waiting for a delivery! Rather, this is a season to listen to the angels among us, to

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overcome our fears, and engage in spreading the message of HOPE in order to help all who receive that message to prepare for the long-desired messiah. There will be times when you will notice “angel tracks” around our church, you may hear the voices (or even choirs) of angels offering God’s messages here, there, or anywhere. And you may even notice that God uses your voice and your actions to calm another’s fears long enough to help that one to receive the good news.

May we encounter many angels...even a Gabriel...as we journey through this Advent season in search of the One who came to save. Amen.