

Luke 1:5-25
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⁵In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” ¹⁹The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” ²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. ²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵“This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Like his kinsman Jesus, John’s birth was a surprise. His mother Elizabeth and his father Zechariah had begun to despair of ever having children for they were getting on in years. But then Zechariah, a priest, who was serving in the temple in Jerusalem entered into the Holy of Holies in the Temple. You all know that the Temple in Jerusalem was the center of worship for the Jewish people. But the Temple was not just a building, but a large complex. As you would enter through the gates you would be entering the Court of Gentiles, that was an area that anyone could enter. But then you could go through what was called the Beautiful Gate and you would enter the Court of Women, a place where Jewish women could enter to worship. Inside of that court was called the Court of Israel, which was limited to Jewish men. Visible from there, up a few steps was the Court of Priests or the Holy Place, where the

priests would conduct sacrifices. But then you came to a large curtain that separated the Court of Priests from the Holy of Holies. And nobody went in there, except once a year. This was the place that many considered the very seat of God on earth. The tradition was that once a year a priest would enter into the holy of holies and make an offering to God. That had been the place where they had kept the Ark of the Covenant before that first temple had been destroyed. The priest who would enter was chosen by lot. In their minds it was dangerous to be exposed to the presence of God. The priest who was so chosen would go in by himself, with a rope tied around his ankle, so if he happened to see God and was struck dead by the sight, the others could pull him out without endangering themselves. When Zechariah entered the Holy of Holies he encountered not God, but the angel Gabriel, who appeared to him and told him that he and Elizabeth would have a son and “he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” You can imagine how Zechariah must have responded, who are we to have a son like that? Zechariah is an old man and nobody special and he and Elizabeth are not from powerful families. Why should this happen to them? And so he questions Gabriel, like maybe this archangel has made a mistake. And so he is made mute and cannot speak until the child is born. John who becomes the baptizer and herald of the coming Christ and this nobody from nowhere changes the world.

And I think that is Luke’s point. Throughout his gospel, Luke emphasizes that it is God’s pattern to take what is small and unnoticed in the eyes of the world and use that very thing, that very person to change the world. An unknown priest, and older childless woman, a small town carpenter, an unwed young woman expecting a baby, a bunch of shepherds on a hillside. It’s these people that God chooses to speak to and use and to do wonderful things, not Caesar, not Herod, not Pilate, not the high priest.

But isn’t that still the way it is? I’ve been thinking about that this week. There’s lots of things going on, dealing with the pandemic, refugees, tension between countries, wondering about inflation and the

price of gasoline, climate change and election reform and all the other things we worry about if we keep the news on 24/7. And why don't the powers that be do things about this? Where's Biden and what the heck is Congress doing or not doing? And why can't nations mobilize together to fix some of these things?

But then I read this passage—in the time of King Herod, the most powerful king Israel had in the last 500 years, and during the time of Augustus Caesar, who created an empire that would last for centuries, and the other leaders in Jerusalem, and the angel Gabriel came to none of them, no one on the who's who list. And I wonder, why should we expect it to be any different today? Who's going to change the world for us, today? Who is God going to use?

Will he use the leaders? Probably somewhat: we've had and I trust we'll continue to have strong leadership in the world whether they be governmental officials like the president or religious leaders like the Pope or the Dali Lama.

But this moment isn't about them. It's about someone whom the world sees as insignificant—a first grade teacher, a clerk in a store, a mom who is too busy, a retired senior who is looking for some peace, an overworked underpaid nurse, even a small town preacher. The way Luke tells this story tells us that God uses not the people in places of obvious power, not the people on the who's who list, but the other people, the people like you and me. When Biden was president and Wittmer was governor, the angel Gabriel came to someone in Richland, or Plainwell or Comstock or Kalamazoo or Hickory Corners—places not too different from coming to Zechariah in Jerusalem.

It's us. It's you and me that God will use to change the world. We are the ones called like John to announce the coming of the Lord, to proclaim the redemption of the world. That's crazy right? What can we do? We can't do enough to change the world. We can. We just don't know it.

There's an old story from the Muslim Sufi tradition about the wise and humble man who was granted one wish by God. The man thought for a bit and then asked God for the ability to do good to everyone he met but then--to keep himself humble—he asked that he never realize the good he was doing. And

God granted his wish. And then, after thinking about it for a while, God thought that this was such a good idea that he would grant the same wish to everyone. And so he did.¹

It is us, and people just like us, and people who aren't much like us, we are all part of the kingdom of God, and we all are charged with the responsibility to make that kingdom ever more a part of our world. It is when you love the child or encourage the teenager or listen to the senior, it is when you make this place a place where everyone feels welcome and at home and safe. It is when you encounter a person of another faith and you respond in respect and curiosity and acceptance and not in fear. It is when we remember that Jesus tells us not to close ourselves off from the world, to not be not afraid, because he is with us. And yes, the best way we prepare the way of the lord is first, through prayer.

I have a little plaque in my office that was given to me about a twenty years ago that says, "Prayer changes things." I believe that it does. Because I do believe that prayer changes people, and then people change things. Prepare ye the way of the Lord begins with preparing ourselves through prayer. This Advent, let's start there.

This Advent we celebrate the announcement of the coming of the Kingdom by the birth of a child to a poor couple in a small town. And the world changed. And maybe we can begin to be aware that we don't have to be powerful politicians or celebrities or famous people in order to be used by God. God is ready to use our talents and abilities to change the world, even if it is in a small simple way. God calls us to see that God is at work right now changing the world through our small acts, in our relationships, in our jobs, in our families, in our communities, in our church life. As we pray, as we treat each other with love, as we refrain from selfishness, as we forgive and trust, as we welcome the stranger, then little by little, this place, this community and this world become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, where he shall reign forever and ever.

¹ Fulghum, Robert. *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. p. 80.