

Message Series: **'Simply Jesus'**
Message Title: **'Mercy Moments'**
Scripture Source: **Luke 1:67-79**
Speaker: John Garner
Date: Sunday, December 14, 2014

The Man behind the Message: Luke 1:5-25

This man doesn't get a lot of 'air time' during the Christmas season, maybe an honourable mention occasionally, yet he is often overlooked. Overshadowed by others, especially Mary and Joseph. And understandably, by Jesus!

Yet, Zechariah is an important character in the Christmas story and the lead up to the birth of Jesus. His story is integral to God's overarching drama. Let's get to know him a little better, the circumstances of his life and see if we can glean insights for our lives. Then, let's examine with thoughtfulness and faith, his incredible message. A message that radiates hope to people like you and me, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

Cultural Circumstances Matter: Luke 1:5

Zechariah was a Jewish priest in a very dark time in Jewish history. Herod was a loathed leader. "He was an Idumean by descent but professed the Jewish religion." For all of his tangible accomplishments in the realm of property development and building projects, including rebuilding the temple, he was a leader with blood on his hands. He ruled with an iron fist. Mercy was a foreign concept to him. One writer has written an arresting account of his reign:

"He acted with relentless cruelty towards any sign of opposition to his sovereignty. His last years especially were characterized by bloody family horrors. He regarded his own family with so much distrust that he had several of them done to death. Finally in 4 B.C. he dies, unmourned by his own kin and hated by the Jewish nation." (N. Geldenhuys)

Think about leaders in our more recent history who crushed their own people, who plundered and acted in their own dark and depraved interests...Idi Amin, Robert Mugabe...add to the list.

It was in the atmosphere of spiritual darkness, cultural and societal uncertainty and unease that Zechariah served God's purposes as a priest. He was born into a priestly family. Thousands of priests walked the streets. He came from the 'order of Abijah'...one order of a total of 24. Elizabeth his wife was also from a priestly family. That both came from a priestly lineage was highly regarded in the Jewish culture. Even their names have rich significance. "The name of Zechariah means, "The Lord remembers" (his promises and covenant)...Elizabeth means "God is the faithful one."

Character Matters: Luke 1:6

Impeccable character and conduct in the eyes of God. A simple and concise assessment in rendered and recorded by Luke, the author of this gospel.

Personal Circumstances: Luke 1:7

"But they had no children..." This aging couple loved God deeply and lived with the ache of a deep disappointment. In their Jewish culture, to be without children was a source of shame and disgrace. They lived with this 'stigma of shame' for decades. Yet, they maintained personal integrity through faith, obedience, and love. And Zechariah faithfully served God as a priest, offering up sacrifices and prayers on behalf of the Jewish people for forgiveness of sins. That was at the heart of the priest's sacred role. A priest would serve for a week at a time, and only once in a lifetime would a priest be honoured with burning incense before God. This would happen twice each day.

And Then, an Unexpected Visitor: Luke 1:11-23

Gabriel, an angel of God comes to Zechariah with a mind boggling message. 'Your prayers for a child will be answered. Your wife will give birth to a son, his name will be John and he will prepare the people for the coming of Messiah.' Can you imagine what was going through his fearful and rattled brain? A dominating doubt springs forward: 'How can this be, we are old.' An understandable doubt, but one not excused or validated by God. The tongue that voiced the doubt will be silent till after the baby's birth. And that's exactly what happened. The baby is born and named John which means, 'God is gracious.'

Insights for Us

God wants to connect personally with people and infuse them...you and me, with the promise of hope. He understands your circumstances today. He understands the 'aches' you live with. Can you put a name to each one? He knows where your heart is at with him. And why. Can you describe the 'location'?

Far from God? Starting to move in his direction? Close to Him? Starting to drift from Him? Back and forth? Please think these things through honestly and reflectively. Come up with true answers. Zechariah could have bailed on God because of a profound disappointment that created an ache. But he chose not to. As can you and I, with God's help.

The Message Announced: Luke 1:67-79

His tongue is loosed, and praise flows freely. And...why not? What a message it is! God has remembered his people. Hope has come calling, looking for tender and teachable hearts. Then, and now, there and here.

Let's explore this message by wrapping it in 8 words.

1. **ARRIVAL: Luke 1:68, 78.** "because he has come...by which the rising sun will come to us"
There are some 'visits' you anticipate and some, not so much! Why is it that some visits fill your heart with vibrant anticipation? It's the person showing up at your door, it's their character, your shared history. You feel safe with them. You can't wait to see their face and spend time with them. Face time is anticipated, the real kind not the technical version.
The Christmas story is about God coming near to us in the person of Jesus. John 1:14 read.
1 John 1:1-4 (Reader?)
2. **REDEMPTION: Luke 1:68** Through Jesus Christ we can be liberated from the penalty and power of sin, guilt, and judgment. Romans 6:23
3. **SALVATION: Luke 1:69-75** There are hundreds of promises in the Old Testament that speak of God's intent to provide salvation for his people. Often, the Jewish people looked for a political salvation from the authority of the Romans. God's intent went deeper, to provide spiritual deliverance through the coming of Messiah. Isaiah 7,9 53, Micah 5:2, Genesis 12:1-3
4. **PREPARATION: Luke 1:76** Zechariah joyfully announces the truth that his son John will help prepare people's hearts for the coming of Messiah. Again, fulfillment of Old Testament promises. Isaiah 40:3, Malachi 3:1 John the Baptist faithfully, courageously, and passionately challenged people to 'get right with God', to turn from their self-directed ways and follow Jesus as Messiah. See John 1:35-37.
5. **KNOWLEDGE: Luke 1:77** God yearns for people to know the truth about Him, themselves, sin, death, salvation, and forgiveness. Some people simply don't know. There is a ton of error, misconceptions, lies and falsehood 'out there.' Grow knowledgeable about God from his word and in community with others.
6. **FORGIVENESS: Luke 1:77** "Forgiveness is not so much the remission of a penalty as the restoration of a relationship." (W. Barclay) I John 1:9 note the word 'all', it is very inclusive.
7. **MERCY: Luke 1:78** I love these words! The elegance of the language, the hope is breathed into 'mercy-deprived' lives. "Because of the tender mercy of our God" Forgiveness and salvation are rooted in the

mercy of God. Titus 3:5 "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." Ephesians 2:4 "But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ..."

Mercy "compassionate or kindly forbearance shown toward an offender...an act of kindness, compassion or favor." I am grateful that this 'offender' has been shown mercy.

8. ENLIGHTENMENT: Luke 1:79 God, through Jesus, shows us how to live, reveals to us the truth about life, others, Himself. "Through the heartfelt mercies of God, God's Sunrise will break in upon us, Shining on those sitting in darkness, those sitting in the shadow of death, Then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace." (The Message) John 8:12

Let me ask you, these truths are to be experienced by you and me. Which word/truth do you most need to experience today? To act upon? To believe as never before?

- Is it to believe that God has come near to you? He has shown up at 'your door.' And He knows the details of your circumstances, your 'aches'. **ARRIVAL**
- Is it to believe that you can experience liberation from the power and penalty of sin? **REDEMPTION**
- Is it **SALVATION**? Your guilt can be forgiven. A relationship with God is offered to you.
- Is it **PREPARATION**? Is this a time of getting serious about turning your heart toward God, to turn from a self-directed life?
- Is it **KNOWLEDGE**? Do you need to take full responsibility to know God and His word more fully?
- Is it **MERCY**? Do you need to acknowledge that you are a sinner, loved by God and needing his forgiving mercy? Will you? Proverbs 28:13
- Is it **ENLIGHTENMENT**? You may be wandering around in confusion and uncertainty. Jesus offers direction. Will you follow Him and his words? Believing isn't enough; following Jesus today is required. Will you, just for today? And then, repeat tomorrow!