

Foretold: The Birth of John the Baptist
Luke 1:21-25

November 5, 2017

21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When 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. 23 When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

Everyone has a daily routine. We get up maybe exercise, take a shower, brush your teeth, shave, or put on makeup. Then get dressed and eat breakfast and go to work or school. Have a lunch break then finish work or school. Then you get to run your errands and go home so you can fix dinner and eat dinner. You might do some chores if you need to or maybe some homework. Finally you get to relax and go to bed so that you can start all over again. The point of this is that during a typical day we are all very busy. Even for people that are retired. I often hear retired people say they didn't know that they would be so busy.

We live in a busy society that demands a lot of our attention. There is politics, and politics, and politics - Clinton e-mails and Russian election involvement. There is terrorism, danger and destruction. There is Syria and the refugees, attacks on police, hurricanes, California wildfire, and other natural disasters. Then there is sports, movies, stories about celebrities. On top of that is the shopping we have to do, the doctor visits, and other appointments. The point is we live very busy lives. No matter who you are, where you are, or when you live, we all live very busy lives. There is a lot going on around us and you cannot pay attention to all of it. What we do is we focus on what is important to us, in our lives, at that particular moment. Due to the business of life, and our focus on what is important to the self, something important may be going on around us and we don't even know about it.

What is happening in the Scripture is known to us because we have the Bible. But at that time this story was not news. Only handful of people even know about it; for everyone else life goes on as usual.

Zechariah has a daily routine and a busy life like everyone else. He lives in a little town in the hill country of Judea and he is a priest. During the time of king David plans were made for the temple construction and service. Priests were divided into 24 divisions. They rotate, take turns, serve for a week at a time. Zechariah traveled to Jerusalem to serve his duty. He was lucky because burning the incense in Holy Place was a very high honor. Lots were cast among the priestly division that was on duty. A priest was fortunate if he had received this honor just once in a lifetime because there was a total of about 20,000 priests.

The Holy Place is the second most holy place in the temple, only the Holy of Holies is above it. His wife is Elizabeth. Both are known to be righteous and blameless, faithful and devoted. However, they are getting on in age. We don't know how old or any of the details regarding fertility. Life goes on for them as normal except for the fact that they are childless. Both are descendants of Aaron. This is an honor for a priestly family but the honor is jeopardized by the shame of being childless so Zechariah spends a considerable amount of time praying to God for a son.

While Zechariah is doing his honorable priestly duties the Angel Gabriel appears in the Holy Place. Now I don't know about you but I would be scared to death. The Scripture tells us that Zachariah was so terrified he was overwhelmed with fear. The Angel Gabriel tells him "I have some good news for you your wife will have a child, he will be a great man, he will teach a lot of people, and he will get a bunch of them to repent." Zechariah is confused by all of

this and asks "how?" The Angel response is "since you doubt this, you will not be able to speak until what I said comes true."

Other priests were waiting for Zechariah to finish his duties. The normal routine is that Zechariah, or whomever is in charge of burning incense in the Holy Place, would not linger in the sanctuary but pronounce the priestly blessing over the people. Well, this day is different, Zechariah delayed in the sanctuary. When he comes out he cannot talk; all he can do is motion to them that he cannot speak. They realize something is going on - he has seen a vision.

Zechariah had a long standing prayer that God would grant him a son. That prayer is answered. God not only granted them a child but their child is special. The angel declares a future greatness of this child that he will be the forerunner to the Messiah. This is the greatest blessing possible for a faithful priest.

Old Testament prophecy predicated the age of the Messiah. But remember we get busy in life, society is very busy, we get into our routines, and things go on around us that is unknown to us. There were several Old Testament prophets but none since Malachi. The era of prophecy has ended. This announcement from the angel Gabriel to Zechariah that his son John would be filled with the Holy Spirit is a signal that the messianic age is dawning. For centuries there have been no prophets, no angels, no divine intervention, no transcendence of the divine reaching through cosmos to us, nothing. Now the angelic appearance is a sign, it is a signal that a big change is on the horizon. Zachariah is the only one that knows and he can't say anything about it. For everyone else life goes on as usual.

With the foretelling of the birth of John the Baptist we have the first indication that something really big is about to happen. The angel Gabriel is on a mission to speak for God, to bring the news to Zechariah. The angel did not appear to the high priest or to any of the priestly elite; not even to the religious leaders, but to Zechariah the humble man of righteousness.