

“When Gabriel Speaks” (Part 1)

Luke 1.5-25

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He was an old man, that Zechariah. He and his wife Elizabeth, they were both “getting on in years.” They had an impressive pedigree; both of their families traced their ancestry back to Aaron, the brother of Moses; their family history went back *thirteen centuries*. Both of them were “righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.” Zechariah was a priest at the great temple in Jerusalem, and all the evidence suggests he was a *good* priest. He didn’t just “do his job.” It *meant* something to him. Obeying God *mattered* to him.

Yet they were childless, this elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. No more generations to spring forth from *this* part of the family tree. Sure, there were relatives, cousins, like Elizabeth’s young cousin up north, who was engaged to a good man. *Maybe they will be blessed with children*, Elizabeth surely thought. But no children for Zechariah and Elizabeth; it hadn’t happened, despite years of trying, and surely it wasn’t going to happen now.

That didn’t stop Zechariah from praying. Oh, to have a son, what joy that would have brought him. Or a daughter, the laughter a daughter would bring. Zechariah went about his business, offering sacrifices, burning incense, lifting up prayers for the people, no doubt interspersing a few prayers for himself and his wife as well. But *that* prayer, the prayer that he and his wife would bear a child – how many years had he been praying *that* prayer? How many *decades*?

Then it happened, that fateful day. Zechariah was doing his job, leading the daily worship service at the temple. He’d gotten to that part in the service where he would enter the Holy Place, the sacred shrine; he would proceed to the altar made of acacia wood and overlaid with gold, to burn incense on that altar. This was the most special part of the service, beloved by the rabbis; the smoke from the burning incense symbolized the prayers of the people gathered outside, the smoke and the prayers both rising up to God. Imagine if we were to burn a special candle every time we got to that part of our worship service where we lift up *your* prayers, the smoke and the prayers rising together to the heavens. Zechariah had performed this ritual countless times before, always the same, never changing – until that day. Until that day, when he entered the Holy Place, and standing there, next to the incense altar, was an angel of the Lord. Not just *any* angel of the Lord, he learned a few minutes later, but *Gabriel*. The magnificent angel Gabriel.

He had heard of Gabriel, of course. Every Jew who was sincere about their faith had heard of Gabriel. Gabriel was the angel who had appeared to Daniel, hundreds of years earlier, when many of the Jews were in exile in Babylon, the angel who explained the meaning of one of Daniel's bizarre visions. (Daniel 8) Gabriel had come to Daniel a second time, bringing a prophecy about what would happen to Jerusalem and the Jews. (Daniel 9) Some of the rabbis said that Gabriel appeared in one of Ezekiel's vision, that he was the "man in linen" was sent by God to save the Jews who were faithful. (Ezekiel 9) Then there were the legends, the stories about Gabriel that Zechariah had undoubtedly heard, stories that weren't in the scriptures but that circulated among the faithful, legends saying that Gabriel was God's appointed overseer of Paradise and the serpents and the Cherubim, legends saying that God had appointed Gabriel to exercise dominion over all the spiritual powers in the cosmos, legends saying that Gabriel was one of God's handful of archangels, serving God at the pinnacle of angelic might and prominence, alongside the likes of Michael and Raphael. Gabriel wasn't just *any* angel. He was – he was – well, he was *Gabriel*. "God is my strength," is what his name meant. A strong angel, a *very* strong angel, faithfully devoted to serving a *very* strong God.

What was Gabriel doing *here*, in the temple? What was Gabriel doing, coming *now*, at *this* time, *this* particular point in human history? It had been *hundreds of years* since Gabriel's last recorded appearance. Why now? And why – to *Zechariah*? Why come to *this* elderly priest? To deliver a message? Yes, to deliver a message. "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John." That's how Gabriel's message begins, with an announcement that the prayer Zechariah has been praying all these long years has finally been answered. He is going to become a father. He is going to have a son. Zechariah's heart leaps. *A son, for me and my beloved wife, an answer to our prayers!*

But wait. Why would God send this great archangel just to deliver *that* message? God has a countless *host* of angels at his command. What's so special about Zechariah and Elizabeth that it warranted *this* particular messenger? Or, rather ... what's so special about the *child*?

Zechariah had imagined what it would be like to have a son. Training him in the faith of the Jews, the rituals and customs and traditions. Raising him up to enter the priesthood, taking his place here in the temple, performing sacrifices, burning incense, helping the prayers of the people ascend to almighty God. But as Gabriel keeps talking, Zechariah realizes: *God has a different plan in mind*. God envisions that this son will not be a priest, but something *better* than a priest. Something more significant. Somebody with more of a lasting impact. "He will be great in the sight of the Lord." "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit." "He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God." He will inspire uncaring parents to start caring about their children. He will inspire disobedient people to submit to the wisdom of God. He will be the one who *makes ready a people prepared for the Lord*.

Zechariah knows his service in the temple is valuable. But he also knows how many people the temple rituals aren't reaching. All those people who have given up on the rituals and the traditions because they just don't seem to make much *difference*. All those people who are sick of the hypocrisy they see (rightfully so, thinks Zechariah) in the institutional religion. All those people who are looking for meaning in other practices, some of them heading out into the wilderness, to commune with God *there*. All those people who are hurting and broken, carrying around deep wounds from their past,

wondering if God truly cares, truly *loves* them. All those people who are straying from the path, sometimes mildly, sometimes flagrantly. All those people who think they are just too far gone. Zechariah knows full well: the services he performs in the temple, they are *good*, but they aren't *really* reaching all those people. Oh, yes, of course, he lifts up prayers for the wayward and the broken and the hurting and the lost, but there's *more* that could be done. Someone needs to be *talking* with them. Someone needs to be *listening* to them. Someone needs to be *connecting with their hearts*.

Zechariah knows: the world, his people, they need *more*. He listens to the reports, he hears what's *really* going on out there in the world, he *knows* the heartache, the anguish, the longing, the desperation. He has a distinct sense that he's not reaching the people who most urgently need to be reached, that the world is slipping more and more into darkness, that the people need *more* than what institutional religion is able to provide. What Israel needs, he know, is someone who can do *more* than just lead worship, offer sacrifices, burn incense. Someone who can take God's Word to the places where he and his fellow priests aren't reaching. Take it to the people who frequent the taverns, or the brothels. Take it to the people who have sold themselves to the service of the Romans. Take it to those who have committed murder, adultery, blasphemy, or worse. Take it to those who abuse their children, those who swindle their business partners, those who overcharge for their services. Take it to those who are filled with hatred, filled with rage, filled with sadness, filled with regret. Take it to those who are hungry – desperately hungry – for a fresh start, a clean slate, forgiveness of sins, restoration with God. Israel needed someone who would not just maintain religious practices, but someone who would *shake things up*. Someone who could offer a chance for the wayward and the lost to come home again.

Zechariah realizes: his *son* is going to be that person. Or, at least, his son is going to help *point* people in that direction. He listens to Gabriel's words. He has some trouble believing them. It sounds too good to be true. "How will I know that this will be so?" he asks. Not his smartest move. It's not wise to question the truth of what an archangel is telling you. Not wise to question the wisdom of God. He spends the next nine months mute as a result.

But at least he knew: God was up to something. God was up to something, *big*. Something so grand, so significant, that it necessitated an archangel to deliver the message. The *Messiah* was on the way. The Savior of the world. The very Son of God.

He also knew: the world wasn't ready for the Messiah. Not quite yet. God needed someone else. A herald. A forerunner. A man named "John." The name means "God gives graciously." *This* is what God was up to; *this* is what Zechariah and Elizabeth's role would be, to raise this child. God was *giving graciously*, to a broken and hurting world, to a people whose established religious traditions weren't *really* reaching the people they most desperately needed to reach. God was offering a fresh start. A new beginning. A way for *everyone*, for *all* of God's beloved people, to come *home*.

Elizabeth conceives. The family rejoices. The wheels have been set in motion. And Gabriel heads on his way, to his next stop: Elizabeth's young cousin, way up north. He has a message to deliver to her too.

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