

Part 2: The Story of a God Who Remembers

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Last week we began the book of Luke by looking at his introduction to his book. There we learned a bit of who Luke is, to whom he is writing, and to what end he is writing. Today we are going to drift out of introduction and we are going to begin the story of the good news which Luke wants you to have certainty regarding.

What lay before us in Luke 1:5-25 is the story of announcement of the first gospel in the book. In Luke 1:19 the angel Gabriel declares to Zechariah, "I stand in the presence of God and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news." As we touched on last week, the Greek would literally read "I stand in the presence of God and I was sent to speak to you and to gospel to you." Here in this text the first act of "gospel-ing," declaring the good news begins.

Of the four gospel accounts preserved for us in scripture, it is only Luke's gospel which includes the story we will spend the next two weeks looking at. As we approach the Advent season where the church historically acknowledges the anxious anticipation of God's promise, today we focus on how we wait for and in light of God's promise. What we are going to see this morning is **The trial and privilege of waiting on a God who remembers.**

Just as it might sound we are going to see in our text today a series of seeming trials God's people faced, but the amazing privilege of seeing God begin to move again.

So with that said, let me read once more our text for us today: **Luke 1:5-12.**

If you've ever written a story, or had to write a paper for a history class, you know that the most important decision you will make is where your story begins. It is therefore with a similar importance and significance that we want to closely root ourselves in the story of the gospel by immersing ourselves in the beginning of the gospel here in Luke. Luke doesn't begin with the birth of Jesus, but in his attempt to lay out for us an orderly account he reaches back even further than that into the story of the prophecy and birth of John the Baptist.

We are going to split this passage into weeks. You'll notice that our passage today stops before God's angel even speaks! Next week we are going to hear the content of this wonderful message Gabriel would proclaim.

But today we are going to focus not on the content of the gospel, but on the context of the gospel. That is the world into which this gospel came. This is important for us to understand because in seeing the events of the world of Luke we also prepare ourselves for the receipt of and belief in the gospel in our own world.

If you're a believer in here today you may remember times in your life where you look out at whatever the circumstances are around you and you have the lingering thought in your mind that, "God cannot be working here." Or maybe you are not a believer, and part of what hinders your coming to Jesus is that

you see the world and all of its ills and think, "All of this randomness and conflict is proof that there is no divine order or cosmic king, the world simply is what it is."

But our story today shows us that when it seems God might have forgotten, when it seems that the plan of God has faded away into nothingness, when it seems politics, and powerbrokers are the only hope, God shows up. What might seem like God's forgetfulness is often his master plan of faithfulness.

Luke's gospel begins in the context of trials and unrest. This is our first point today and it's here in verses five through ten that we see **The Trial** of the day.

Luke's gospel story begins in a world on edge. We see in these first ten verses three specific places of unrest. We will see first political unrest, personal unrest, and providential unrest.

We see the nature of this **political unrest** when we see Luke's opening line in **Luke 1:1a**.

When we hear this context marker, we may not even bat an eye at it. But for the readers in Luke's day it would have read as if Luke said, "In the days of Stalin, ruler of Eastern Europe."

Herod, who we know in history to be "Herod the Great," was known for many things. Being a benevolent, kingly, figure was not one of them.

Part of why politics is so powerful in our lives is because we were made to be ruled by someone, and therefore to find our hope in the one who ruled us. This ultimately and finally will be Jesus as our forever king, but in different periods God gave human kings as placeholders.

Part of God's promise to Israel was that kings would come from their line. In 2 Samuel 7, God promises a forever, good king would sit on Israel's throne. But as the Kings of Israel fell into sin, and the kingdom into disrepair the hope Israel had in their king was always frustrated.

Even as God brought Israel out of captivity in Babylon Israel still longed for political identity. There was a King, and some peace for a season, but then they were attacked by another political empire. For a brief time there was a successful Jewish uprising which boasted an exclusively Jewish rule, but even after all that bloodshed it only lasted a few years before the Roman General Pompey marched on Jerusalem in 63 B.C.

As Pompey came, so too did Roman oppression and it was there that Herod's father who was half-Jewish, aligned himself with Rome and won the favor of the empire. It was when the infamous Marc Anthony rode back into Jerusalem to crush another uprising that Anthony established Herod as a client-king over Judea.

So not only was Herod not fully Jewish, but he cared for Israel only to the degree it leveraged him in the eyes of Rome. He immediately executed groups of Jewish nationalists and ended up killing much of his own family out of paranoia. Further in the gospel of Matthew we see that Herod was actively working against God's plan to bring about his forever king by murdering all the babies under the age of two.

So for a people who were waiting for the promised Kingdom of God, this Herod, King of Judea, was nothing more than a puppet king and false hope. You can imagine their thoughts. Was this as good as it would get? Did God forget about his promise?

But in contrast to Herod, we meet faithful Jews, Zechariah and Elizabeth, but here we encounter ***personal unrest***. Read with me once more **Luke 1:5-7**.

As Israel was seemingly handed from one pagan empire to the next, many Jews during this time were completely pagan. They adopted Greek customs, worshipped Greek gods, took Greek names, or even worse--continued to synthesize the worship of Yahweh with the worship of the gods of the Greek Pantheon.

But God promised in the Old Testament that despite the unfaithfulness of Israel that he would always keep a remnant. That is when it seems everyone was leaving the faith, God would hold, by the power of his promise, a faithful people through whom God would keep his promise to all his people.

Here we have Zechariah a priest, and his wife Elizabeth. Both of them were part of this holy remnant. They were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

This didn't mean that this couple had no need for the gospel which was about to be proclaimed to them. When Luke here calls them righteous before God it wasn't that they were sinless before God, but they were righteous in regards to the commandments of the Law. In other words in a world where many priests and Israelites ignored God's word—failing to trust in God's promise to save those who trusted him—these two faithfully walked in God's promise.

They kept the sacrifices. They didn't go through the motions of obedience, they heartily trusted God's promise to deliver those who trusted in him. Here were the good guys, and yet, there was a problem.

Luke's language expresses the double nature of this problem: Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years. There wasn't much hope for these two.

If you struggle with barrenness, or childlessness, or know someone who does, you know the crushing frustration and hopelessness that accompanies this. But during Zechariah's day this was compounded all the more because even though God historically worked through barren women, it was thought culturally that a closed womb was a sign of God's displeasure.

That certainly one of these two had a closet full of skeletons that no one knew and that is why they had no children. Have you ever had thoughts like that about the trials in your own life? I imagine what is worse than the despair of thinking God isn't working in your life is the idea because of some trial of failing God won't work in your life. But that's not where this story ends.

You can imagine how Zechariah and Elizabeth feel. They feel scorned by others, and you have to imagine they feel forgotten by God. Their names even add a level of irony here. In Hebrew Zechariah means, "The Lord Remembers" and Elizabeth means, "God's promise."

For them this might create an existential crisis! "Does God remember? Where is God's promise? Here we are obeying when so few people are. Here we are hoping when so few people do. And what is our reward? Barrenness!"

But finally we see a third level of unrest and this is **providential unrest**. In the providence and power of God, something unique was happening in the lives of God's people.

Read with me **Luke 1:8-10**. So here we see God's people, and Zechariah as a priest are continuing to faithfully do what God called them to do in regards to the temple. It's been hundreds of years since the temple was rebuilt in Jerusalem and here, God's priests are continuing to labor in it.

Despite the waning interest in Yahweh among God's people, despite the puppet king, despite the Roman occupation, despite the personal problems, people are still doing the same things and seemingly nothing is changing.

On top of all of this God stopped speaking. For 400 years in Israel's history mouths of God's prophets were sealed. No miracle, no oracle, no revelation, just 400 years of political unrest, silence and a continued service of God who claimed to care for them.

The last piece of revelation God gave his people was from the mouth of the prophet Malachi and look at what it says: **Malachi 4:1-6**.

God was about to do something great! God was about to restore the righteousness to his people. Israel was going to come out of the gate like a young calf set free from his shoot, jubilantly, joyously! But those days didn't seem to be coming and on top of all of that God said nothing.

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever looked out at the events of our world and thought, "What is going on?" Have you ever looked into the trials of your own life and thought, "Where is God?" Have you ever read your Bible and thought to yourself, "Why aren't you saying anything!?"

For four hundred years, hundreds of generations, people did the same things, saw the same problems, read the same headlines and figured out how to live their life. Part of what Luke is trying to show us in the description of Zechariah's service is how mundane even this seemed to be.

It does not appear that Zechariah was the High Priest, he was an ordinary priest, who just so happened to have his lot cast for him to go into the Holy Place of the temple and burn incense. While that sounds, and was a unique privilege, the Old Testament prescribed that incense was to be burned there twice daily. This wasn't the Day of Atonement. This was an ordinary, daily act.

What's interesting is that despite the ordinary nature of everything going on, people were still gathered to pray. As Zechariah went in to burn fragrant incense before a God who seemingly had left the building, the whole multitude was out in the courtyard praying.

If that were you, if perhaps this feeling of frustration, isolation, and apathy is you, what would you be praying for?

But amidst all this ordinary silence, it just so happened that during the days of Herod, King of Judea, a lowly village priest, with a barren wife, was randomly selected to enter the temple of the Lord, and it just so happened that the name of the priest was "The Lord Remembers," and that on that day the veil of silence which cloaked the God of Israel was about to be shattered.

In the midst of what seemed like forgetfulness, God was working for his faithfulness.

Here we see **The Privilege** of waiting on a God who remembers.

We need to be reminded of things daily. We often forget what we are asked, or what needs to be done. But the God of scripture needs no such prompt. Which means that when it is time in his divine pleasure to act, our God acts.

Read with me **Luke 1:8-12**.

In a puppet kingdom, in an age of unprecedented silence, to an old man, with a barren wife, of a restless people, God showed up.

When Zechariah took the incense into the temple he went into what is called the Holy Place, he walked past the table of the presence, past the golden lampstands and there at the end of the hallway was the altar of incense. Behind that altar was a curtain, behind that curtain was the Holy of Holies.

Zechariah probably knew two things about the Holy of Holies. He knew that in the Old Testament the Holy of Holies was where God's righteous, consuming fire of a presence dwelt. He knew that just like when you take a hot dish out of the oven, if you do it without care, you will get burned. People who wrongly approached God's presence in the Old Testament were struck dead by the sheer weight of God's righteousness.

But we know Zechariah is also old. Old enough to perhaps remember the day 50 years ago when Pompey marched on Jerusalem and strolled into that Temple and as an act of defiance and curiosity, went past the curtain, into the Holy of Holies. And you know what happened? Nothing. The pagan general waltzed into the place where God was supposed to be and nothing happened.

You can imagine the tension Zechariah and the other priests had in the temple. On one hand they knew that was where God was supposed to dwell. But on the other hand, it seemed like God had forgotten to come home. The only thing that ever came out of that curtain was the high priest who went in once a year.

But on this day, an angel of the Lord appeared to the right of the altar. Luke includes that location because it would have appeared to Zechariah that the angel came out from behind the curtain.

There is the wonderful phrase C.S. Lewis uses in Narnia and it is a phrase that fills the worried people with hope: "Aslan is on the move."

Here as the angel of Yahweh appeared, the God who was on the move in silent, was now on the move in surround sound. Just as the people of Israel cried out in Egypt for 400 years and the Lord heard, here the Lord moved once again.

The story of the gospel is a supernatural story of God remembering his people and acting in miraculous ways. The message of the gospel begins not on the mouth of another prophet, but from the lips of an angel. This message is not rooted in what man did, but what God had long promised to do.

This message which Luke was to encourage Theophilus with, the message that Luke wants you to have certainty regarding, is a message of a God who promised his people long ago, and of a God who is now acting to keep his promise to save.

When we encounter the gospel we encounter the hope that God remembers. Where Zechariah and Elizabeth hoped in promises made, we this side of the cross come to the gospel in light of promises kept.

The proclamation we will see next week is the proclamation that everything God promised in Malachi 4 was now coming to fruition. That the new Elijah who prepares for the day of the Lord had finally come.

We sitting here today have the privilege of knowing the rest of the story of Luke. We know that John the Baptist is going to pave the way for Jesus, and that Jesus is God with us. The true King who gives us new life, and dwells with us through the power of the Spirit.

If you want good news, if you feel like you've been waiting your whole life for something that doesn't seem to ever come, come here to Jesus. The way God answers the prayers of the waiting and weary is through the angelic message that salvation is coming.

But this is also why we need to understand the context for Luke. Because for those of us who do hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we ourselves are not done waiting are we? It was 400 years of waiting which led to the first chapter of Luke, but it's been 2,000 years since the last chapter of Luke.

Look at what Peter says in **2 Peter 3:10-13**.

Jesus has come, but Jesus is coming again. We now find ourselves in a period where we might have all the emotions the people in Luke did. But there is a key difference here. We know even more than they did that God did indeed act and that he will not forget his promise. We know this because we know the message of the angel. We know that God didn't come to dwell in his temple, he came to dwell with us in his Son, a son who died for sinners so that one day those who hope in him will be rid of all the trials which plague us.

Our job then is to wait well. In a world of trials, with hearts prone to forgetfulness and empty ritual, the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth gives us two points of application which help us live in light of Jesus' second coming.

First we have the privilege of ***Walking with Jesus in Righteousness***.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had every reason to walk away from their obedience. But they chose to continue to obey God, they were righteous before God.

We who live this side of the cross and who come to faith in Jesus have something even better than the righteousness of the law, we have the righteousness of Jesus Christ by faith! That means that as we await the coming kingdom we too have the privilege of walking with Jesus.

We do this in two ways, first we have the wonderful joy of realizing that Jesus has made us blameless. We get walk with and before God not as sinners, but as saints because Jesus took our sin and gave us his righteousness. But secondly we wait with the power of the Holy Spirit giving us the joy and desire to walk in holiness.

Look at what Paul says in **Philippians 2:14-16**. We have the privilege and the promise of the Holy Spirit in us who holds us to faithful obedience as we wait for Jesus to come again.

But secondly, we have the privilege of ***Trusting in God's Promised Means***. We see that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God, but also Zechariah was serving before God in verse eight. As we wait we wait with both a righteous hope and a righteous service.

One thing we see in this story is that despite the seeming silence and the mundane nature of life, Zechariah and those who prayed, still showed up to the places God called them to show up. Even though the temple may have seemed like an empty home of a careless God, they went and it was in these places that God promised to work that God began to work anew.

When we are frustrated in our hearts with the seeming periods of waiting, what is often first to go are the acts in which God calls us to endure trusting that he will work in those means. We stop reading our Bible, we stop praying, we stop going to church because we feel like it won't matter!

But here we see that it is never apart from those means that God works. God might not choose to open the waters of refreshment that day, but to remove ourselves from the spout is to remove ourselves from any potential for water.

Just as Zechariah and Elizabeth continued to use the means that God prescribed, let us not grow weary even when things seem hard. What we see in this story, and what is confirmed in the gospel is that God uses what he promises to use. It might not always be how we want him to, in the time-line we want, but we know that God will not forget us.

Consider Paul's words once more in **2 Corinthians 4:16-18**.

Let us not lose heart, but let us together look to the context into which Luke's gospel came and encourage one another that we serve a God who moves, who speaks, and who has done all of that for us in the gospel of Jesus Christ.