

*Read also 1 Kings 18:16-21, 30-39*

John's introduction of Jesus as the Word who was with God and was God – that lovely description of Jesus as the persistent light that overcomes darkness is suddenly interrupted by another introduction. John tells us of someone else – almost as if he were saying, “Oh and I've got to tell you about this other person, too. He was a most important witness to the light.” READ John 1:6-9

You remember the story, don't you? An elderly couple experienced an unusual event. A miracle! The man was a priest. He had a problem. No children. He prayed about it. Finally, God heard Zechariah's prayers. They would have a baby. When Zechariah got the news from Gabriel, he was so stunned that he didn't believe it!

How often have you not believed something good was coming to you in answer to your prayers and devotion? The Bible tells it as it is; that's why it is so real.

Zechariah struggled with faith, and was punished. He became mute. But it did not mean he lost the blessing. Little John was born. Family and friends expected him to be named Zechariah Jr. But, Elizabeth and Zechariah were adamant that he was to be named John. They were convinced God was at work.

Perhaps some of Zechariah's unbelief was because he wasn't used to God showing up in the temple. Do you expect God to be here? Also, he might have been hesitant about the prophet part. The angel told Zechariah that his son would come “with the spirit and power of Elijah,” that he would “turn the disobedient back to the Lord” (LK 1:17). As a priest, Zechariah knew that would be a dangerous and trying assignment.

We studied Elijah for our Fall Conversation series, and we learned that Elijah's witness for God came at considerable cost. It required full devotion and often brought challenges. As you heard this morning, he had to trust and follow God at all costs; probably more than he would have ever imagined doing.

John was sent by God, with the power and spirit of Elijah, as a witness to testify to the light.

God always uses people. God doesn't send some sort of aerial banner or skywriting airplane, but He finds a person – someone to speak his message, like you or me.

Zechariah gave a message, it kind of burst forth. The Holy Spirit fell on him and he just started talking about what God was doing and about this precious little child.

And even though Zechariah knew that John would most likely suffer kind of like Elijah did, even though he knew there would be sacrifices he would have to make, Zechariah prophesies of a larger vision; the greater purpose – that people need to be prepared for the Lord. Listen carefully.

READ Luke 1:68-79

Zechariah had learned God was really here. As a Jew he'd been in church probably all of his life, kind of like some of you. Maybe he often felt being a believer was perfunctory; something you just did because you were raised with it. But through those nine months of waiting, he began to see it. He began to understand this network of connection woven in the Scriptures.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . . in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God . . . all things came into being through Him . . . and in Him was the light of life.

He began to see that the birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of years of planning and preparation. Nothing would stop it. The Bible says, “at just the right time, God sent His Son (1 Tim 2:6). God’s plans are perfect and will happen.

Zechariah didn’t ignore it; he didn’t reject it; he didn’t say somebody else would do it; his heart and mind were open and so he proclaimed the message.

You see, there had been 400 years of silence from God. No prophet. Israel was subject to Roman rule and Rome’s paganism overshadowed them. Faith was at an all-time low. Can you identify? We feel the shadow of secularism.

Think about what the Christmas season was like in your school as a child. It was called Christmas for one, while today it is nothing more than a winter holiday; a shopping spree. Kids line up at the mall to buy things or see Santa. On You-tube you can see a video in which a little boy asks, “Where’s the line to see Jesus? Is it here at the store?” The video has nearly three million hits. There’s a deep spiritual need.

John was sent in a similarly dark time, with a good message. Zechariah said that light was about to break forth. It means:

1. God looks favorably on you
2. God has raised up a mighty savior to redeem you, just as God promised
3. Through Him, believers will be saved from our enemies so we can worship God in freedom, holiness, and righteousness
4. This is all accomplished by God’s tender mercy.

God is a caring, responsive God who loves you; who desires to see you find fulfillment in freely worshiping Him, not being overcome by evil and darkness.

There’s nothing perfunctory about that. This is not religion as usual. It’s so much more, and requires so much more. But once Zechariah caught the vision, he understood the great value his little son would accomplish and the difference he would make by proclaiming God’s good message.

In your mind John the Baptist may be that weird guy who lived in the wilderness, ate bugs, wore rags, and yelled “Repent!” But Zechariah said, “John helps people find salvation through forgiveness of their sins.” (77) John mirrored their problem.

John told the Jews, “Stop being half-hearted believers. Instead, let God be front and center.”  
“Share with others. Be honest in your business dealings.”

These were hard things, but sometimes when someone mirrors the truth to you, it helps you be open to Jesus and His better way.

Last year a woman from our congregation went on a trip with her sister and she has given me permission to share this story. One evening she and her sister talked about religion and her sister said, “I think when people say Jesus was the Son of God – that’s ridiculous. He was a teacher and a religious leader, but not divine.”

But our friend said, “I believe that He is God and was sent by God to save us. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; and whoever believes in Jesus will have eternal life,” to which the sister replied, “You’re a bigger idiot than I thought.”

Wow, strong words. Perhaps you have experienced the same. I imagine John the Baptist saw such hard opposition to God, too.

Then \_\_\_ said something beautiful. She said to her sister, “Faith is your choice. I choose to believe it and I think on this one we have to agree to disagree. I’m not changing my opinion.”

Six months passed. Then, one day she got a call from her sister. “I’ve got something to tell you” she said. It’s going to make you really happy. We are going to church now.” Her sister had turned around, had changed her view.

One person’s willingness to be a witness eventually prepared her to hear and receive God’s good message.

The message calls for turning away from unbelief and receiving forgiveness. That message has eternal consequences. It’s told through your loving but firm witness.

Are you taking the message seriously? Are you living it, letting it fulfill you with its importance, and then opening your mouth?

Elijah did the same thing in his day. He lived at a time when faith had become perfunctory for God’s people. They were torn between their faith and pagan gods. They were half-hearted believers. So God sent a prophet to remind them.

Elijah brought a hard message to Israel’s king and to the people. He said, “How long will you waver, hobbling between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kgs 18:21).

Elijah held a showdown between God and Baal, and when God came down and consumed the offering, all the people saw it, fell on their faces and said, “The Lord indeed is God” (v. 39).

God sends people to prepare others to hear the message. Do you believe, "Indeed the Lord is God?" Are you following your Savior wholeheartedly? Or, have you drifted away from the core, distracted by values of a culture full of darkness?

God knows true fulfillment comes through worshiping and serving Him fully and freely; that to be used by God is a most worthy blessing to you and to others.

John said, "I am a voice shouting in the wilderness, 'Clear the way for the LORD's coming!'" (Jn 1:23). It's God's good message bringing light to the world.

It's the message of a lifetime and it leads you to great peace.

AMEN