



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

BELIEVING THE UNBELIEVABLE

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Only 26 shopping days left. Can you believe we're so close to Christmas already? I've been looking forward to this sermon series for quite a while, because I love the stories we get to focus on at Christmas time. This year, I decided to spend some time examining the messages the different angels in the story had to bring.

Let's do a little word association. What comes to mind when you think of angels?

Angels have become very popular in American culture. We're fascinated by them. But there are a lot of mixed up ideas of what angels are like. Movies and TV reflect many of the misconceptions. You have the angels who are really just humans who are moving up or down the chain, such as Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life* or John Travolta's character in *Michael*. You have the angels who wish they could be human. And you have the angels who come in to solve problems, almost like God. None of those ideas have much connection to reality

The Bible doesn't go into a lot of detail about angels, which I think is a good thing. I'll use an example from everyday life to explain why. At my office, we do a lot of shipping documents and packages. Almost everyday, we have to get something somewhere that same day. So what do we do? We call a courier service and they come and pick up whatever is the rush package and take it wherever we want in a matter of a couple hours. They drop off many items as well, because we are always on deadline.

Let's say one day a courier comes and delivers an urgent package that has to be dealt with right away. But as I'm signing for the package, I notice the hand-held computer the courier is using to track packages and I think it's pretty awesome. He can key in information and tell me exactly where all my other shipments are at any given moment. Then I notice he's driving a cool van, so I go out to take a look at it. And as I'm talking to him, I hear his next stop is clear over on the Eastside, and he's going to take this secret back route I don't know about, so I ask if I can ride along with him. In the meantime, the package that was so urgent, the package that was the whole reason he came, has been left unattended.

Angels are kind of like God's couriers. They carry messages from him. I think if the Bible told us much more information about angels, we'd get distracted. Anyone who lives with God has to be pretty interesting, and I think I could easily be sidetracked and

forget about the important things they had to say. We'd go off and leave the package on the counter unopened – THE most important thing.

There are four angel visits leading up to the birth of Jesus, and I'd like to look at one each week with you over the next four Sundays.

Luke 1:5-25

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

This is the story before the story. Just like John the Baptist will prepare the way for Jesus, Luke is preparing his readers for the story of Jesus with another miraculous event that sets the stage.

God is giving all kinds of signals that something big is about to happen. He chooses an elderly childless couple, much like Abraham and Sarah. The priest is named Zechariah – the same name as the Old Testament prophet who predicted Christ’s coming. God makes the announcement as close to the heart of his people as he could – In Jerusalem, in the Temple, in the Holy Place. If you were looking for the center of Jewish spiritual life, you wouldn’t go anywhere else.

God sends the angel Gabriel – the same angel who visited Daniel twice with a vision about when he would set up his kingdom. And if you really like the prophetic details, the timetable between Gabriel talking to Zechariah and the birth of Christ is 70 weeks – which was the timetable he used when talking to Daniel about how long it would be until God’s kingdom broke into history. As one friend of mine put it, everything about the way Luke tells this story sets us up to know that what’s coming is going to be of biblical proportions.

We could explore any one of those connections and make a whole sermon out of it. But the main point is that the timing and details of what took place were carefully planned out. It’s almost humorous that Zechariah was chosen by lot to go in, which is basically like picking straws. God didn’t leave anything to chance. He knew exactly who was going in to burn incense long before it happened. Even when circumstances appear random, God is in control.

What an incredible experience for Zechariah. During this time in Israel’s history there were approximately 8,000 priests. It was a hereditary role, and it wasn’t one they served in every day. It was a bit like being in the Reserves. Twice a year, each priest had one week of active duty in the Temple. Each day, one priest would go into the Holy Place and light incense in front of the veil that screened off the Holy of Holies, where the ark of the covenant sat. It was a very high privilege to get to be the priest who lit the incense, and with 8,000 priests, when Zechariah was chosen, this was a chance of a lifetime. It was unlikely he would ever have another opportunity like this one.

Luke wants us to know two important things about Zechariah and Elizabeth. First, he makes a big point of the fact that these were good, upstanding people. Both of them came from the priestly families descended from Aaron. Both of them were blameless, Luke tells us, obeying all of God’s commands and regulations together. They were doing everything right.

At the same time, they were childless. They were not likely to have children at this point either, because this was long before fertility drugs and test tube babies and 56 year old mothers giving birth to twins.

To first century Jewish minds, those two facts didn't match up. If you were doing everything you were supposed to, then God was supposed to bless you in return. Conversely, if you weren't experiencing the blessings, such as having kids, it must be because you were doing something wrong. Elizabeth must have come to terms with it, but she still referred to it as her disgrace.

It's very easy to fall into the trap of working for rewards with God. We obey expecting God to hold up his end of the bargain and bless us for what we do. There are any number of churches today that would say that if you're not experiencing the abundant life God wants for you, you're doing something wrong.

Luke points us to two people here who were what he calls "blameless." You couldn't find a fault with them, and yet life hadn't been fair. God is not a vending machine where we get what we want when we pay the right price. **Sometimes we're called to be faithful in our service to God even when we can't see an immediate payoff.**

When Zechariah was alive, there had been 400 years of silence from God. For us, that would be like from the time of the first Pilgrims we talked about last week until now. Zechariah was dutiful and faithful and obedient and righteous – but he wasn't expecting to meet with God when he went in to offer the incense. I know I've been guilty of the same thing – going to church without any real expectation that I will meet God there. When God has seemed silent for a while, it's hard to remember he can speak whenever and wherever he chooses.

Seeing that angel would have been a shock. You light the bowl. Close your eyes to say a quick prayer, then open them and see someone standing right there – someone who is obviously more than human. Luke tells us Zechariah was gripped with fear, or seized with fear. Have you ever been so scared that it felt like something was squeezing you and you couldn't move? That's where Zechariah was.

I'm sure this was partly due to the sight itself, and partly also to the fact that there were provisions in the law for dragging a priest out of the Temple if he was struck down by the Lord. Zechariah may have believed that the angel had been sent to end his life.

Gabriel doesn't let him squirm there for long. The first words out of his mouth are, "Do not be afraid." He then follows it up with this reason: "Your prayer has been heard."

The God who hears overcomes our fears.

I don't know what Zechariah's prayer was. At this point in his life, he wasn't still praying for a baby. As a priest, he would have been praying for the consolation of Israel and the coming of the Messiah. But whether it was a recent prayer or an older prayer Gabriel was referring to – one that was personal or one that was for all God's people – what was comforting was the fact that the prayers were not just bouncing off the ceiling. God was listening.

Psalm 145:19

*He fulfills the desires of those who fear him;
he hears their cry and saves them.*

God was about to fulfill the desires of Zechariah and Elizabeth in a way far beyond what they had expected or imagined. As the years went by, they may have felt at times that God was completely ignoring them. And Gabriel comes and says, “God has been listening. He hasn’t forgotten you.”

We serve the same God.

1 John 5:14

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

It is a source of comfort to know that God listens and cares.

Gabriel then went on to elaborate about the way in which God would show he had heard Zechariah.

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

That’s quite a future John has in front of him. But that didn’t really sink in at first for Zechariah. “Go back to what you first said...Elizabeth is going to have a baby?”

The shock of initially seeing the angel had worn off. Zechariah quickly went from fear to skepticism. What Gabriel was saying couldn’t possibly be true, because Elizabeth couldn’t have kids, and even if she could she was now too old. Zechariah had a difficult time believing his ears.

I believe this is where the main message for us today comes in. Because just like with Zechariah, the unbelievable thing for us is that God would want to do something new in our lives at a point when new things just don’t happen.

This is an issue whether you are still unsure of your beliefs, or whether you’ve been following Christ your whole life or you’re somewhere in between. We get hung up on reality. We hear what God wants to do, and we come up with a whole list of reasons why he can’t. It’s because we forget one simple truth:

The God who acts ignores the facts.

God isn't too concerned about the circumstances that seem so impossible to us. He's God. He can make new circumstances.

Rom 4:17

...the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

We do what Zechariah did and say, "I'm not sure this can really be true." When that happens, we're really turning things around and making them about us again, rather than about God. **When we don't believe God can work, we don't believe God is God.**

In the beginning we said that Zechariah and Elizabeth weren't being punished by not having a baby. Their actions hadn't caused that result. Now, God shows that the reverse is also true: **Our abilities are not what earn his blessing.** This is about his plan and what he wants to do – not about Zechariah's ability to make it happen.

God wants to move in our lives, to do a new thing, and it's going to be about him. It's not going to be about how good we are, what perfect specimens we are and what we bring to the table. That's what's unbelievable, and it requires faith in God to accept it.

We saw our good friends the Hopely's this week. They're the ones who have two teenagers that were in a terrible car crash two years ago, and the daughter is still in a wheelchair and dealing with all kinds of disabilities.

Dale is a pastor in Westport, and this summer he felt like God was telling them it was time to move back to Arizona. He had applied at some places, but nobody was offering him a job or anything. Then a man came along out of the blue and said he wanted to buy their house. So Dale and his wife Kimmy had a decision to face: Were they going to believe that God really had said it was time to move to Arizona, or would they turn down the house offer since they had no secure future to go to? Their daughter Bethany still needs so much attention right now, she's almost through with school. Would it be too much instability and upheaval to listen to that voice?

They decided it was time to go. So they closed the deal on the house and went ahead and told the church board they were leaving, even though they didn't know what the next step would be. That very night after the board meeting, Dale received a call from a church in Arizona he had applied to months earlier, asking him to interview for a position next week.

Whether or not that job comes through, what is very clear is that God is honoring their trust in him. Dale and Kimmy know two things are true about God: He is trustworthy and he is good. In spite of circumstances that would scream "This can't be true!", they are believing God for the unbelievable and trusting that he's good all the time. And that lets them have a front row seat to see what God will do.

Zechariah got sidelined. Can't you just hear the frustration in Gabriel's voice? "Do you know who you're talking to? I am Gabriel. I came here from standing in God's presence. He sent me to tell you this incredibly good news, and all you can say is 'I'm not so sure about this'? You know what – I shut the lions' mouths for Daniel, and now I'm shutting your mouth.

You had the chance to enjoy this moment. It's still going to happen, but you've given up a bit of the happiness about it in your unbelief."

Zechariah's lack of faith only hurt himself. Nothing changed about what God did – only Zechariah's experience of it was altered.

All that silence paid off, though. By the time John was finally born, Zechariah understood.

Luke 1:68-79

*"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come and has redeemed his people.
He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us-
to show mercy to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."*

Zechariah's song was almost entirely about God and what he was doing. There's only one little line in there about John. Zechariah learned that when God acts, he can ignore the facts or create his own.

He also learned another truth:

God's gift to you is for others, too.

What was an answer to a heart's desire for Zechariah and Elizabeth would be so much more. Look again at Gabriel's words.

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Once Zechariah was able to get past that first hurdle of believing this could happen, he discovered that God's purpose in it all was far bigger than he had imagined. John the Baptist would grow into a man who would prepare people for Jesus. He would talk about repentance. He would talk about sin. And it would lay the groundwork for people being ready to receive the message of God's forgiveness through Jesus.

Luke actually tells a little story later on about how that looked in real life for some people.

Acts 19:1-5

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?"

"John's baptism," they replied.

Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

Those people and countless others who had heard John preach had their hearts prepared for Jesus. They were made aware of their own need for God.

What Gabriel told Zechariah about was so much bigger than just a personal blessing. And when God does something in our lives, he's got something bigger in mind as well. His actions in our lives become like John the Baptist – they help prepare other people for an encounter with Christ. As people see what God has done for you, it does a work in their hearts as well, either by encouraging them or showing them what they're missing or how they need to change. It lays new groundwork. And then, when he does a new thing in their lives, the same thing will happen: He'll use that to reach other people.

As we approach Christmas this year, God is preparing all of us for what he wants to do in our lives. So here are some things to ask yourself:

1. What is my prayer? What am I asking God for? Do I believe that he hears me and cares enough to answer?
2. Do I believe that God can do something new in my life? No matter where I'm at, do I trust that it's about him and not me? Do I believe God is really God?
3. What gift has God given me that needs to be shared? Am I letting God use that to prepare other people for what he wants to do in their lives?

Zechariah learned to believe the unbelievable – that God wanted to do a new work in his life that would have a profound impact on other lives. It's the same God who is ready to work in us as well. The question is, are we ready for him?