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## “Zechariah, the Unprepared” Sermon Series: “Four Christmas Stories”

Sunday, December 2, 2007©

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Scripture Lesson: *Luke 1:1-25*

If late one night you found that you could not sleep and stumbled downstairs into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator door, and in the pale yellow light saw the an angel standing there beside you and he said, “Do not be afraid, Eric (or George or Linda or Tom or Mary), for your prayer has been heard.” What would that prayer be? Let us pray.

*Heavenly Father, despite our disbelief, please favor us this morning with your Word. Pour it into us so that we might be prepared for the great movement of your Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Have you ever been made to feel like a fool because you had misplaced hope? Have you ever been bamboozled by ridiculously high expectations? If you ever drive down to Florida on I-95, for about 200 miles—beginning in South Carolina—you will see billboards for a place called the “Florida Welcome Center.” Each successive, hulking billboard promises delights and wonders: hammerhead sharks, great whites, a two-ton alligator, discount souvenirs and a free glass of Florida orange juice. Jen and I drove from Ohio to Florida a few years ago, we were lured by the billboard’s siren song. It had been a long trip and I couldn’t wait to quench my thirst with some fresh-squeezed orange juice while I stared down a giant crocodile or a monster of the deep eye-to-eye. I was amazed that such a place even existed. But when we got there we discovered, much to

our dismay, that the Florida Welcome Center was little more than a souped up 7-11. The sharks, the great monsters of the deep, were only a few inches long. I had seen bigger fish on pizza. The alligator was two tons—but he was made of concrete and a frosty of glass of fresh squeezed Florida Orange juice was nothing more than a Dixie Cup half-filled with what seemed to be Tang. I had high expectations and I felt like a fool.

However, when it comes to God and His plan for us, we are a fool if we do not have high expectations.

Luke begins the story of the birth of Jesus Christ by teaching us about the birth of his cousin, John the Baptist. John’s story begins here in Luke before he is even conceived. John’s father, Zechariah, was a priest, one of thousands in Israel. His mother, Elizabeth was her name, was the daughter and granddaughter of priests. And they were good people. Luke tells us that they were both “*righteous before God and walked blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.*” They had a very good life in every respect, save one—they had no children. This, it goes without saying, is painful for nearly any married couple, but in that day and age it was a tragedy. There was no Social Security plan and no 401(k)s. No children meant no one to take care of them in their old age. No children meant that they were eyed with suspicion by everyone around because the childless were believed to be cursed by God. Luke also tells us that

Zechariah and Elizabeth were, in his gentle words, “advanced in years.” This is a nice way of saying that they were as old as the hills, well past the age where anyone could reasonably expect that a child was in their future. Their fate, seemingly, was sealed.

But then one day Zechariah was discharging his priestly duties, by himself in the holy place of the temple, burning incense upon the altar at one of the two times in the day when the priests were alone burning incense in the temple. Given the thousands of priests in Jerusalem, this was more than likely the only opportunity in his life that Zechariah would have had the honor of burning the incense. It was the height of a priestly career. This would roughly be akin to me preaching at the halftime of a Chiefs game—talk about a crowd ripe to hear a message of hope!

Now you may ask, “Why burn incense?” Were they trying to cover up some kind of odor? Was the temple musty? No. While Zechariah burned the incense, thousands of people prayed outside the temple. Zechariah himself prayed inside the temple and the rising smoke of the incense represented the prayers of the people rising up to God. As Zechariah stood there praying, with the incense rising, its sweet smell filling the temple—an angel of the Lord appeared.

And Zechariah, Luke tells us, was filled with fear—which of us wouldn’t be if an angel suddenly stepped into our space. But you can imagine the scene—Zechariah, all alone in the temple, for the first and only time just feet away from the Holy of Holies—what the Jews believed to be the literal zip code of the maker of heaven and earth. Zechariah is lucky he didn’t have a heart attack!

This angel, sent by God, was the bearer of good news, great news actually, “*Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been*

*heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord.” Luke 1:13-15.*

And the angel went on to say that not only would their son be a great man but he would prepare the way for the coming of the Savior into the world. And, upon hearing this, you might think that Zechariah would be ecstatic. You might think that he would slap the angel a high five or dance a little jig or something.

Instead, he doesn’t believe him. “*And Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.’ Luke 1:18* Now in Zechariah’s defense, men always seem to have trouble with this concept. I remember when Jen told me that she was pregnant. We were on vacation. I had just come in from the beach. We had been snorkeling in the ocean, eating out every night. I had read about six books since the trip started. I was living in a fantasy world. My response to this wonderful news that I had child on the way was, “Are you sure?” Like Zechariah, I just wasn’t prepared.

However, I got off a little easier than poor Zechariah, “*And the angel answered him, ‘I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.’ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute.” Luke 1:19-22* And Zechariah remained unable to

speaking for at least the next nine months, until eight days after his son was born.

When I put this sermon series together, I struggled a little bit with including this passage. I wondered what it has to say to us. Because the discipline of not being able to speak, I have to admit, seems a little harsh to me—I would never make it. Should we be surprised that Zechariah, as old as the hills, whose prayers for a child had gone unanswered for most of his life, had low expectations?

I think we learn something very important about God in this story. God wants us to hope and never despair. God wants us to have high expectations for what He will do in our life. And I would go so far to say God takes it as a personal affront when we underestimate His capacity or His desire to bless us.

In the book of Numbers we are told that the Israelites, wandering in the wilderness, underestimated God's ability to get them into the Promised Land and they wept and cried and said, "Let's go back to Egypt where we were slaves, but at least we were safe!" Hearing this, God told Moses, "*How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?*" *Numbers 14:11* Moses had to plead with God to not wipe out the Israelites from the face of the earth because of their low expectations. Oh yes, I think having low expectations bothers God a great deal.

We see this attitude in Jesus as well. We are told that one day Jesus and the disciples got in a boat to cross to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus fell asleep and a sudden storm blew in. The boat began to fill with water and Luke tells us they were all in danger. The disciples woke up Jesus screaming, "Master, master we are

perishing!" Jesus, very calmly and deliberately, told the wind and the waves to be still and the sea got still, but then he turned to his harried disciples and said, "*Where is your faith?*" *Luke 8:25*

Faith and despair cannot coexist. They are mutually exclusive. To know God, to be alive in Christ, is to have high expectations and unbounded hope for what He will do for us out of His great love.

Last Saturday night, Jen and I found ourselves—along with about 80,000 other people—in Arrowhead Stadium for the Missouri and Kansas game. I've been to a lot of sporting events in my life—a lot. I was practically born with a ticket in my hand. But I have never been in a crowd with so much energy and electricity. Of course I think part of what made that game so great was that it was so unexpected. Anyone who had conjectured back in August that Missouri and Kansas would be playing after Thanksgiving for a shot at the national title probably would have been called a fool. But there we were 80,000 of us watching it happen.

Samuel Beckett wrote a play, which I imagine at least a few of us were forced to read in English class, called *Waiting for Godot*. In that play two men spend two days waiting by the side of the road for someone called Godot to show up. The two men are just bored to death, leading pointless, meaningless lives. But they claim that when Godot finally arrives, he will fix their boredom, and bestow upon them lives of meaning and purpose and consequence. The entire play passes with the two men waiting and at the end, Godot has never shown up. But they are assured he will. Samuel Beckett was an atheist. And his point in this play, I think, is that only fools keep waiting for God to show up. Only fools keep believing. Only fools keep trusting and hoping and pleading.

There was a point in Zechariah's life when, if the angel Gabriel stood by his side in the temple and told him he would have a son, Zechariah would not have questioned it, but would have given Gabriel a high five right then and there. He would have danced a jig. He would have believed him right away! But the Zechariah we knew was way past that point. He had stopped praying for a child, stopped hoping, stopped wishing and believing. The circumstances dictated otherwise. He and Elizabeth were just too old. Only a fool would hope for something so outrageous.

When did you stop waiting for God? When did you stop hoping? When did you stop pleading and trusting? When did you say, "I won't be a fool?" Have you ever heard the phrase, "Christmas is for children?" I don't believe that but I think the people who do mean Christmas is for those who have hope. It is for those whose spirit has yet to be crushed. It is for those who still have the ability to believe and have faith. I don't think Christmas is just for children. At least I hope not. I think Christmas is for fools.

Paul wrote, "*We are fools for Christ's sake.*" *1 Corinthians 4:10* Don't let the circumstances of this world stop you from being a fool for Jesus Christ. Don't let the

circumstances of this life stop you from believing and trusting and hoping and pleading. Don't let the circumstances of this world convince that Jesus Christ is finished doing marvelous things in your life.

*"Do not be afraid. For your prayer has been heard,"* is how the angel Gabriel greeted Zechariah in the temple. If one night you found that you could not sleep and stumbled downstairs into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator door, and in the pale yellow light saw the an angel standing there beside you and he said, "Do not be afraid, Eric (or George or Linda or Tom or Mary), for your prayer has been heard." What would that prayer be? I can promise you that if you have ever lifted up a prayer toward heaven in the name of Jesus Christ that it has been heard.