

December 20, 2020

“Altar-ed Christmas: Altered Everything

[Luke 1:57-80](#)

This Advent as we have been going through the beginning of Luke’s gospel, we have been looking at God’s life-altering work in the lives of individuals that God was using to bring about His redemptive story and the fulfillment of His promises in the arrival of His kingdom through the birth of messiah and our savior Jesus Christ.

So far, we have seen a forgotten prayer of Zechariah and Elizabeth for a child answered, and the long ago promise of messiah come to be as the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she will give birth to Jesus, the son of God. Then last week we got a glimpse into some joy-filled, life-giving, live-altering moments between Elizabeth and Mary.

Which now brings us to Elizabeth full of joy and anticipation, moments away from the birth of this miracle baby. And what about her husband Zechariah? Let’s just say he is speechless about the whole thing.

If you remember, we learned back in the first part of Luke 1, that Elizabeth was barren, and could not have a child. Zechariah, her husband, a priest, was chosen for a once in a lifetime opportunity to offer incense in the temple.

While there, Zechariah found himself in the presence of the angel Gabriel and was told his prayer has been heard. A long-ago forgotten prayer for a child was answered. God was going to give them a son. The one who would prepare the way for Jesus, the promised messiah.

And Zechariah’s response to all of this good news was full of praise, gratitude and belief.... Well not exactly. As we sometimes do when confronted with the “what seems to be too good to be true” good news of God’s grace and mercy, Zechariah responded with doubt and unbelief. And for Zechariah, the consequences of his doubt and unbelief would be another sign from God. A sign of silence and a front row seat to wait and watch the faithfulness of God’s promises come to be.

Thank God, our disbelief or doubt does not keep God from accomplishing his purposes or keeping His promises or keep us from His love and great mercy. And so, we see, as promised, Elizabeth conceived and now close to a year later, gives birth to a son.

[Read Luke 1:57-80](#)

As I was thinking about this passage and what it must have been like for Elizabeth and the quiet, silently observing Zechariah throughout the whole pregnancy process I began reflecting on my own personal experience when my wife, Tina, was pregnant. And you know what? I am beginning to think that perhaps Zechariah’s silence was more of a blessing and gift for sweet Elizabeth.

I'm sure there were times Elizabeth missed talking with her husband, and hearing his voice, or having to deal with those frustrating moments of trying to communicate. But as I think back to some of the things I said and the words that came out of my mouth, I now realize it would have been more of a gift if I just remained silent at times.

Like when I said, "Honey, for every pound you gain, I'm going lose a pound... Ya know we gotta balance things out." What was I thinking? Or that time after a long hot and humid East Coast summer day as we are sitting and relaxing and Tina rests her legs across mine. "Wowzer, so that's why they call them canklles? "

Looking back, a little more silence, and little more listening on my part would have definitely been a gift.

Well, for Elizabeth and Zachariah now came the long-awaited moment of answered prayer and fulfilled promise taking place.

Already the Angel's words to Zechariah that spoke of the joy and gladness, and many who would rejoice at this birth were taking place!

As we read in verse 58- *When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her.*

This was a life-altering moment for Elizabeth, and there is something here I don't want us to miss.

The life-altering work of God always involves His great mercy!

The Lord has shown great mercy to Elizabeth. The Lord has shown great mercy to you, to me, to us!

Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples, reflects on this great mercy of God. He writes in 1 Peter 1:3-

*All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is **by his great mercy** that we have been **born again**, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation.*

There is an amazing connection between birth and God's great mercy and life-altering work.

It was by God's great mercy that Elizabeth gives birth to the one who would prepare and point to the One who alters everything and gives us new life and salvation through Him.

It was by God's great mercy we hear Zechariah speak again and his voice gives birth of praises to the tender mercy of God

And It is by God's great mercy that when we were lost, broken, and dead in our sin that God demonstrated his love by sending His Son, our savior, Jesus to be born. To live the life we should have lived. To die the death we should have died and that by His great mercy when we believe in Him, and receive His good altering work we are given a new birth into a new life.

Let me ask you a question. How do you know you have been born... physically born? Don't worry, it's not a trick question. The answer is, you know because you are here. You are alive! But your birth did not happen by anything you did. You didn't work, think, or will yourself into existence.

It's the same with our spiritual birth. Being born again into the family of God is not anything we did but can only be the life altering work of God through His great mercy.

He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior. (Titus 3:5-6)

Christmas is about the birth of our savior. The birth of God's tender mercy in the flesh.

As we continue in this birth passage with Elizabeth and Zechariah we see the great rejoicing and celebration over God's great mercy quickly give way to drama and a family feud over the naming of this miracle baby. From where we enter into the story it can be easy to miss the importance and significance of the naming tradition and custom at that time. For the most part our modern naming customs are usually based on preference or how a name sounds or what and who it reminds us of.

For Tina and me, our biggest concern was trying to pick a name that wouldn't set our kids up to be made fun of or picked on.

For example, one of the names we really liked was Wendy. Cute little Wendy. But with a last name like Emberger that was a no go. Can you imagine? At that point might as well just make her middle name "Juniorbacon". Wendy Juniorbacon Emberger.

In the time and culture of Elizabeth and Zechariah the naming of a child was a big deal. First born sons especially, were given names that honored and carried on a family name and would indicate the child's destiny or vocation. In this instance it was assumed and expected this baby would be named after his father. And as Zach junior he would carry the family name, along with the role and responsibility of following in the priestly footsteps of his father.

But as you remember from our passage a few weeks ago, God had already altered this naming tradition and gave the name and path of this child to Zachariah while in the temple.

So, when Elizabeth steps in and insists his name is John, a non-family name, drama breaks out. A family feud ensues. Seems kind of silly right? Surely none of us have experienced this type of family drama involving traditions and such 😊

They turn to Zechariah, who still seems silent on the whole matter. Surely, he will know the right thing to do. After all this is tradition.

Zechariah has an important decision to make here. And it's not just about names and traditions but is a decision rooted in obedience to God. Has he grown and learned from his time of doubt and unbelief in the temple? Will he give into the expectations and pressure of others or relinquish his will and control and remain faithful and obedient to God?

We all know what it is like to face these kinds of tensions. We like control. We like to please. We like our traditions. We like our freedom. These are not bad things, but when they rule us or cause us to act in ways that differ from God's ways and hinder His altering work in our lives we need to let go and surrender those things to God.

Zechariah knows the importance of obedience to God. Those months of silence and listening and life altering moments has allowed him to reflect on God's great mercy and what God has called him to do and now he will follow through.

"He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.(Luke 1:63-64)

By God's great mercy Zachariah once again speaks and what are the first words that come out of his mouth? Praise and blessing to God.

This life altering moment in Zachariah's life is a great reminder that God's altering work is not just a one and done deal. Even Zachariah, a man of lifelong faith who first introduced to us as righteous and blameless still had areas to grow and deepen his faith in. As one commentator puts it, "It is all too easy to view one's spiritual life as something that can be mastered rather than something to be maintained".

If we are committed to being rooted in Jesus, growing in His love and branching out to serve others then it would be wise to learn from Zachariah's life and example that God's altering work is a life-long process as we are conformed to the image of Christ. And remember the life altering work of God always involves His great mercy.

In these final words of blessing and praise that we have from Zechariah we are left with a reminder that God's great mercy is not a matter of mere words but expresses itself in concrete tangible action and anticipation of greater things to come.

By the tender and great mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:78-79)

Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion

1. In what ways have you seen or experienced God's great mercy in your life?
2. Have you ever had an experience like Zechariah that awakened you or "gave birth" to the reality of the life-altering work of God in your life? What was that like?
3. In the midst of waiting on God, what kinds of words are come to mind? What kind of words are coming out of your mouth?
4. If you were in Zechariah's shoes, what would have been some things you might have expected Zechariah to say instead of what he did say? What might you have said?
5. What does this passage have to say about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love [Together], [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?