



“The Forerunner”
Luke 1:5-25

Idea: John the Baptist was God’s gracious gift who prepared the world for Jesus.

Intro: When you go to a concert, rarely is the main artist performing alone. Typically, there is at least one opening act as a precursor. Opening acts prepare the audience for the main event. This format is true for a boxing match, an MMA fight, a comedy show, or in the case yesterday a Christmas parade. If you were at the Powhatan Christmas Mother Parade yesterday afternoon, then you know what I am referencing. You sat there on the side of the road and watched dozens of floats pass by you and your family. You heard music from them, watched performances, and received candy. Each entry in the parade was there to bless the community and advertise their company or organization, but each one also was a forerunner to the “big guy.” They prepared the audience for ole Saint Nick.

We find this same situation in the passage from Luke’s Gospel that we are examining today. John the Baptist is going to be the forerunner to Jesus. He is God’s gracious gift who will prepare the world for Jesus.

[Read Luke 1:5-25.](#)

Inquiry: When Zechariah was visited by the angel Gabriel, the nation of Israel had been living in darkness for over four hundred years. The people had not heard from a prophet since Malachi. Heaven had been silent during those centuries as the world awaited the coming of the Lord. The spiritual leaders were shackled by tradition, corruption, and their king. Herod the Great ruled Judea. He was a puppet king who had received his commission from Mark Antony and the Roman Senate in 40 B.C. He, then, returned to Judea and began his rule in 37 B.C. He was a tyrant who used the backs of his own people to expand the Temple and build great buildings to spread his fame. He was also a very paranoid and wicked man. He had nine or ten wives. One of them he had executed for no apparent reason. Under his leadership and without a Word from God, it was dark in the Holy Land, but God had not abandoned His people. Light was dawning.

The prophet Malachi had prophesied that God would send a messenger in the spirit of Elijah (Mal 4:5). Zechariah would soon understand this to be the prophesy of his son. He says toward the end of Luke 1, “...*the sunrise shall visit us from on high.*” The night before that sunrise had been long and dark, but the faithful, bright flashes of hope from God’s Word assured the people that one day the night would end. The “*sun of righteousness*” was coming to heal and bring joy (Mal 4:2). Prior to this breaking of light in the darkness, Isaiah too prophesied of a forerunner who would be a voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way (Is 40:3). The long darkness was about to experience sunrise, and Zechariah’s son would be the forerunner to the dawn of light. He would be God’s gracious gift. John would be a gift in three ways.

1. John was a gift to his parents.

Read Luke 1:24-25.

It is no accident that Luke begins his Gospel in the wombs of two women. Children are a gift from God and part of the divine command to “*be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth*” (Gen 1:28). By beginning the story with pregnancy rather than adulthood, Luke illustrates how God in His infinite wisdom placed the weight of His entire redemptive plan on the backs of two unborn babies. One baby will be born to a woman who is older and barren. The other baby will be born to a woman who is young and a virgin. Both are miracles in their own right.

In the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth, they are beyond the years of childbirth. Zechariah is a priest who is from the division of Abijah, which means his people were tasked with service in the Temple by King David. Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron, meaning she was from the priestly line like Zechariah.

The priests were divided into twenty-four divisions, and the those of the house of Abijah made up the eighth division (1 Chron 24:10). Each priest served in the Temple two weeks out of the year. According to the *Mishnah*, before each of the two daily services, four sets of lots were used to determine the participants (*Yoma* 2:1-5). On this particular day, the lot finally fell on Zechariah, and instantly he was at the apex of his career. The honor of offering incense was the grandest event in all his earthly existence. Many priests never got the opportunity, and no priest was allowed to offer it more than once.

Zechariah’s heart was obviously thrilled by the selection, and he could not wait to share everything about the experience with Elizabeth. He entered the Temple area to serve alongside his priestly colleagues. He was in the Court of the Priests where the sacrifice was to be made. Outside, in the Court of Israel, faithful worshipers were praying. As he stepped into the holy place, before him rose the richly embroidered curtain of the Holy of Holies, resplendent with cherubim woven in scarlet, blue, purple, and gold. To his left was the table of showbread. Directly in front of him was the horned golden altar of incense (Ex 30:1-10; 37:25-29). To his right stood the golden candlestick. Zechariah purified the altar and waited joyously for the signal to offer the incense so that, as it were, the sacrifices went up to God wrapped in the sweet incense of prayer.

It was in this moment that Zechariah encountered Gabriel. He stood on the right side of the altar. Zechariah was terrified by the glory of the angel. This is a common response of humans in the Bible. Angels are not cute and cuddly creatures. They represent God and come in His glory. Therefore, the typical response we see in the Bible is that of people covering their eyes, hiding their faces, or even fearing for their lives.

Angels are God’s messengers, and Gabriel came with a message for Zechariah. He and Elizabeth were going to have a son (1:13). This son was to be named John. It is *Yohanan* in Hebrew, which means “God has been gracious.” Names are important to the storyline of the Bible. Zechariah’s name means “Jehovah has remembered.” Gabriel’s message to John was that God had heard his prayer. He had remembered his prayer and answered it. What was the prayer? Surely, Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed for a child, specifically for a son, for years. Gabriel came to declare that God had remembered their prayer. Elizabeth’s name means “God is my oath.” Gabriel’s news too speaks to the faithfulness of God that Elizabeth’s name represents.

This godly couple had longed for a child for decades. They had prayed for years, yet Elizabeth remained barren. More than likely, they had given up on the thought of having a child. Zechariah’s own description of their ages reveals this. He says, “*For I am old, and my wife is advanced in years*” (1:18). He had been married long enough to learn that you never get to specific about your wife’s age.

They had grown used to the cultural shame of having no children. During those early years of their marriage, people used to ask, “When are you going to have children?” As Elizabeth began to age, they began to say with concern, “We are praying for you.” Now in old age, they whispered around her, “She can’t have children.”

Through all their disappointments, Zechariah and Elizabeth continued to serve the Lord. We learn how to respond to disappoint from them. You see, your disappointments will either make you bitter or better. This couple walked righteously and blamelessly before the Lord. They were disappointed that their prayers had not been answered, but they continued to trust in God’s goodness. Finally, in God’s sovereign timing, He answered with a gift. John was that gift.

We dare not read into this story a prosperity gospel. We do not get what we want or have the promise of an easy life because we serve the Lord. The reality is that our lives are often full of both valleys and mountain tops. Suffering is the lot of many believers. Through it all, however, God is faithful and good. He hears our prayers and provides for our needs.

John was a gift to his parents, but that is not all he was.

2. John was a gift to his people.

Read Luke 1:16.

John was God’s special chosen vessel to prepare Israel for their Messiah. He would be born in a miraculous way, be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb, and follow the lifestyle of a Nazirite. His life would be completely consumed by God, which would enable him to be used in a powerful, Elijah kind of way. He would be the voice crying in the wilderness, calling the nation of Israel back to the Lord. Gabriel speaks of John’s ministry by explaining it would so captivate Israel that their homes would be revolutionized. Fathers would awaken to their parental responsibilities. They would avoid the failures of Eli, Samuel, and David. Israel would be prepared for the coming of the Messiah (1:17).

Israel longed for the Messiah who would free them from Roman tyranny and restore the glory of the kingdom. As we shall see, John came as the forerunner, preaching a message of repentance and baptism. He spoke against their sin rather than the sin of Rome. As John prepared the way for the Messiah and the gospel message, he first brought it to God’s chosen people, Israel. As such, John was a gift to his people, but that was not all he was.

3. John was a gift to the planet.

...to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.
– Luke 1:17b

John’s sole purpose as the forerunner to Jesus was to make ready a people prepared to meet the Lord. The scope was bigger than Israel. It began with Israel but reaches to every tongue, tribe, and nation. In the spirit and power of Elijah, he would preach and warn both Jew and Gentile of “*the great and awesome day of the LORD*” (Mal 4:5). In light of God’s looming judgment against sin, John calls sinners to repentance and faith.

The birth of John reminds us of God’s love. He remembers His love for humanity. He remembers his promise to heal and redeem. The third candle of advent is the candle of love. It represents John the Baptist as the forerunner, shining in a dark place. Today is the third Sunday of advent.

Conclusion: As the forerunner to Jesus, John's ministry would be focused on preparing people to meet the Lord. Zechariah, however, had trouble believing the good news Gabriel came to deliver. How could he not believe? Everything needed for proof was right in front of him. He saw Gabriel in all his glory. His very appearance enthralled Zechariah with fear. He and his wife had been praying for a son for years. They believed God would answer. They knew God's Word, trusted Him to be true, and knew the stories of God's faithfulness. There was absolutely no reason not to believe Gabriel's message, yet Zechariah asked for further proof (1:18).

Today, there are may be some of you who know Jesus as your Lord and Savior but you are failing to believe God for what He wants to do in your life. Like Zechariah, you know the Lord is faithful and true. You know Him to be good and benevolent, but for some reason, you lack the faith to step into His plan. I invite you to step into it and begin to believe God.

There may be some other folks here today or watching us online that are not in relationship with Christ, but you have sat under the teaching of God's Word and the gospel enough to believe that it is true. What would keep you from stepping out in faith and embracing Jesus as your Lord and Savior?

Good news: God loves you. He created you and desires to know you.

Bad news: You are a sinner in rebellion against your Creator.

Best news: God has done everything necessary to justly deal with your sin and bring forgiveness and restoration to your life. Today, He calls you to turn from your sin and self and turn to Him as Savior and Lord. Have you received forgiveness in Christ?

What would keep you from embracing the truth and believing on Jesus today? John came as the forerunner of Jesus to prepare a people to meet the Lord. Are you prepared to meet the Lord?