

Message: “Zachariah: Song of Promise”

Where did the Christmas basket sitting on our front porch come from? That’s what Connie wondered. Connie had just returned from the bank, where she’d withdrawn just enough cash to get through the holidays. Life was a struggle, raising two teenagers as a single mom while working two part-time jobs and taking college courses at night. Connie was exhausted. The light at the end of the tunnel sometimes seemed very dim, indeed. And then ... this gift.

Connie looked for a card or a note with the basket, filled to the brim with all sorts of food. There was none. Had someone entered her name into a local charity? The timing couldn’t have been better. It would go a long way in tiding them over until her next paycheck.

At that very moment Connie felt a ripple of guilt. Wasn’t there someone else out there who needed it more? Yes, she and the kids were struggling, but her grandparents and Aunt Shirley, who was deaf, relied solely on social security and disability checks, pooling their resources to get by. At least Connie could always pick up extra hours at work. And when she finished her degree, things would improve a lot.

Connie’s conscience won the debate. She drove to Grandma and Grandpa’s little two-room house. Grandma opened the door. ‘Merry Christmas, Grandma!’ she said as she gave her the basket.

Grandma was thrilled. ‘Oh thank you, Connie! We’ll be able to have such a nice dinner this Sunday. This will really help us until our checks come. But what about you?’

‘We’ll be fine,’ Connie said. After a short visit she excused myself. ‘I still have lots of chores, so I should head back.’ On the way home, thinking about Grandma’s smile, Connie knew the basket had gone to the right place. But like Grandma said... what about *us*? Connie still worried about how she could afford Christmas for her kids.

Then Connie saw it in front of her house, in the same spot as before - an identical Christmas basket, every bit as lovely as the first.”¹

¹ <https://www.guideposts.org/inspiration/miracles/gods-grace/the-christmas-gift-that-kept-on-giving>

Give and you shall receive. What a wonderful story to begin the season of Advent. Connie chose to live life with generosity, rather than scarcity. She acknowledged her fear: she might not have enough to get by. Yet, in being honest, Connie freed herself from that fear and was able to live in a life-giving, loving way. Not only was Connie’s household blessed, but two other households were blessed as well.

What a wonderful blessing as we start a new church year together. Today, the first Sunday of Advent, marks the beginning of the church calendar. We’re celebrating with a new worship series, Songs of Christmas. I invite you to show your appreciation to the Church Council and the volunteers who created and delivered our Advent @ Home kits. We sent every household a kit so we could connect together in some new ways, remembering God’s blessing for us. Together, we are God’s family and our lives are made better when we connect in love.

For each occasion during Advent and Christmas, we’ll focus on the life of a person in the salvation story and see how their narrative inspires and encourages us in our lives today. No matter who you are, what you’re afraid of or what you’ve done, one of these narratives will speak to you. So get your Advent kit, grab your coffee, get comfy and let’s get started.

The first person we’re going to look at is Zachariah (Luke 1:5-25; 57-66). We read Zachariah’s song earlier. The reality is he probably didn’t sing it. But he did say something so meaningful that people later made a song out of it. Before we look at what Zachariah said, it’s helpful to look at what was going on in his life so we get the full impact.

Zachariah is Elizabeth’s husband. Elizabeth is Mary’s much older cousin, so Zachariah is an older man. They don’t have any children, though they always prayed to have some when they were younger. Zachariah is essentially a chaplain, assigned to a military regiment.

One of the duties of each unit was to go into God’s sanctuary and burn an offering of incense while the people prayed. Zachariah would go behind the curtain and do what was necessary. The service only took an hour. Everything went like clockwork, except on this one occasion.

One day, when Zachariah went up to the altar, an angel appeared.

There was no fanfare, no announcement. The angel just appeared. Zachariah was startled ... and afraid. God hadn't appeared or sent a messenger in more than 400 years. Zachariah probably wasn't thinking about that, though. Most likely he was afraid because you never knew what kind of a message the angel was going to deliver. After all, who knows how to act in front of an angel?

The angel calms Zachariah down and gives him good news. God heard their prayers. Elizabeth will become pregnant and give birth to a son. God wants them to name the baby John. John will be a famous prophet and will do great things. They're to raise him in a certain way.

Best of all, the angel tells Zachariah his son John will prepare the people for God. What an amazing gift. **What an amazing promise!**

But Zachariah wasn't open minded. He wasn't willing to hear what God was saying through the messenger. You know how this goes today ... we wait until the other person is done speaking and then we say the most challenging word “*but ...*” Zachariah says, “*but we're too old! How can you expect me to believe this?*” (v18, MSG).

We know what happens next. First, the angel says, “*I'm Gabriel, the sentinel of God, sent to give you good news.*” Gabriel is one of God's most trusted messengers – pay attention! Then the other shoe drops, “*But because you won't believe me, you'll be unable to say a word until the day of your son's birth. Every word I've spoken to you will come true on time - God's time*” (vv19-20).

That's when the camera cuts to the scene in the other room. People are starting to get restless. Zachariah has been behind the curtain for a long time. They're probably whispering, trying to get his attention. When Zachariah does come out, they can tell something happened, but didn't know what it was. He has to use gestures to communicate.

The narrative picks up about nine months later. Elizabeth has come full-term in her pregnancy. She gives birth to a son. All of their friends and neighbors celebrate. She's overwhelmed. On the eighth day, they

come to perform the bris – to circumcise the boy according to their tradition. That’s the day children are named.

They’re ready to name the baby Zachariah after his father.

Elizabeth speaks up, “*No. His name is John*” (v60). They argue with her about it, since no one in the family has that name. Finally, they decide to ask Zachariah. But he can’t speak so how will they know?

Zachariah gestures for a tablet. He writes, “*His name is to be John.*” That surprises everyone, after all, a tradition we follow today is to use a family name. That’s when the greater surprise happens!

Zachariah begins speaking, maybe even singing! What does he say? Zachariah is praising God and giving thanks. A deep reverence settles over everyone. They feel the presence of God. Before long everyone in the area is talking about what happened. Everyone knows God had a hand in what happened.

What a set up for Zachariah’s song of promise! God showed Zachariah he could trust in God’s promises. Zachariah tells us we can trust God’s promise - in song. And what a song it is.

Zachariah starts by blessing God for the freedom we have. God promises to deliver and save us. We hear these words through prophets, pastors, youth leaders, Sunday school teachers, small group leaders and others. God shows us the way. All we have to do is listen and believe.

Zachariah reminds us God is merciful, never forgetting about us. God rescues us, even from ourselves. That frees us to worship God without a care in the world. Zachariah reminds us we are made holy when we are before God: that’s the power of God’s love.

Zachariah gives thanks for his son John and all who offer the invitation to know God to those who are struggling. God forgives and saves with mercy, breaking into the darkness of our minds. There’s a new way, a way of peace based on faith, hope and love.

What a song! What a promise! This is more than a pinky-swear made between BFFs. It’s more than the promise made by a couple on their wedding day. It’s the promise God Almighty made to all people, everywhere for all time. It’s a promise of freedom and hope.

God makes the same promise to everyone today. Regardless of skin tone, language, gender, age, ability or sexual orientation. In spite of our circumstance, situation or location. No matter what we believe. God’s promise stands as a solemn oath.

God promises to save us. Our part? We have to trust, believe and then act on our belief by faith.

You may not be ready. You may not be listening for the quiet voice of God’s messenger. You may find yourselves in silence like Zachariah. Have patience. Stand firm. The Lord is doing a work and it will happen in time – God’s time (James 5:7-8).

Learning to wait is a necessary part of being prepared to receive God’s promise. It’s not a matter of time, but a matter of trust. When you open your heart to wait faithfully, you pave the way for God’s promises to work in your life.

Each of you has a song to sing. It’s the song of life. You’re uniquely and wonderful made to do great things. God is with you. Trust God and turn toward God, putting spiritual things first. That will lead you to turn outward, to connect with others in love. When you do, you’ll find a new voice, a voice of blessing, thanksgiving and praise, will fill your heart, mind and soul.

What a wonderful way to begin a new year together.
That’s a spiritual resolution worth changing your life.

Luke 1:67-79 (CEB)

⁶⁷ John’s father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,

⁶⁸ “Bless the Lord God of Israel

because he has come to help and has delivered his people.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David’s house,

⁷⁰ just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago.

⁷¹ He has brought salvation from our enemies

and from the power of all those who hate us.

⁷² He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

and remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³ the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham.

He has granted ⁷⁴ that we would be rescued

from the power of our enemies

so that we could serve him without fear,

⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness in God’s eyes,

for as long as we live.

⁷⁶ You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.

⁷⁷ You will tell his people how to be saved

through the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ Because of our God’s deep compassion,

the dawn from heaven will break upon us,

⁷⁹ to give light to those who are sitting in darkness

and in the shadow of death,

to guide us on the path of peace.”