

Fear Not, Just Believe  
Luke 1:5-15

### **Slide 1**

Fear and Christmas aren't words that many people would put together. Maybe Halloween and fear, or birthdays and fear. But Christmas and fear? I mean, what's there to fear about Christmas?

Well, according to those in the know there's plenty to fear. If you're Selaphobic (se-la-phobic), you have a fear of flashing lights.

If you suffer from Cyssanophobia (Cys-**san**-o-phobia) then you have a fear of kissing someone under the mistletoe.

If you fear getting together with relatives, you suffer from Syngenesophobia (Syn-**ge**-nes-o-phobia) and Meleagrisphobia (**Me**-lea-gris-phobia) refers to a fear of turkeys, presumably even if they're cooked.

Even gift giving takes a hit if you have Doronophobia (do-**ron**-o-phobia). That refers to a person with social anxiety who hates to receive a gift.

They have a fear of what may be inside of the box. They dread not knowing what the item is, that the item may be harmful physically to them.

Maybe it's not all the bells and whistles that you fear. If the obligation to attend church on Christmas Eve or Christmas day gives you the willies you have Ecclesiophobia (Ec-**cles**-i-o-phobia).

In fact, fear of church seems evidenced in many people through the rest of the year as well.

Maybe you're afraid of the entire season and all its trappings. If so, you'll be glad to know that while it may all be in your head, there is a name for it, and that is Christougenniatikophobia (**Chris**-tou-gen-ni-a-tiko-phobia).

And lastly, there's Lupo-**slip**-a-phobia - the fear of being pursued by timber wolves around a kitchen table while wearing socks on a newly waxed floor.

This is the first Sunday of Advent and our Christmas series, which we are beginning today is entitled: *Fear Not*.

In this series we'll be looking at the various times in the Christmas story where the characters were told to not be afraid.

It's a familiar story for this time of year and most people could fill in the missing details if they were asked.

But they'd be wrong if all they talked about were stables with little animals, drummer boys, and flying reindeer. None of those were part of the story. Seriously, there was no little drummer boy.

Wrapped up in the Christmas celebrations are facts and legends, poems, and songs.

Regardless, Christians, both committed and nominal, will celebrate Christmas around the world in less than a month.

Even those who would never darken the door of a church 364 days out of the year will take time to at least tip their hats to the birth of Christ.

But the story didn't start when the Angel appeared to Mary. It began about 62 miles away and a half-a-year earlier.

## Slide 2

Before the angel appeared to Mary and Joseph, he had already appeared in Jerusalem to a man named Zechariah where he announced the birth of a boy who would be named John.

This morning we're going to look at the story of Jesus' older cousin John. Why? Because the story of Jesus would never be complete without John's story.

And, because there's so much detail in the book of Luke about what happened prior to Jesus' birth, many commentators believe it's a firsthand view of the miraculous which could only have come from one source, Mary.

Regardless, let's begin our journey where our journey should begin, at the beginning.

Luke 1:5, *"In the time of Herod king of Judea... Historically we're at the end of four hundred years of silence in the story of Israel.*

The last recorded words from one of God's prophets is found in the book of Malachi. Since then, the people of Israel had been waiting to be delivered from the various occupiers of their country.

Let's continue, Luke 1:5, *"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."*

Elizabeth is actually a relative of Mary's. Earlier I called John a cousin because I didn't know what else to call him. Probably that's what he would've been called in those extended families.

Think about it, when you can't think of anything else to call someone who's kin, you call them your cousin.

You know if they aren't your brother or sister, niece, or nephew then they have to be your cousin.

When Gabriel appeared to Mary, at beginning of the Christmas story, he revealed this to her:

*Luke 1:36, "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month."*

In the King James Version, Elizabeth is called Mary's cousin but the word in the original Greek was much broader than that.

It meant someone who was related to you, somehow. She may have been her cousin; we just don't know.

What we do know is that Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron and Mary was a descendant of David, so whatever relationship they shared was on their mother's side of the family tree.

But we do know a few things about Zechariah and Elizabeth, we know that they were good people.

The Bible tells us in Luke 1:6, *"Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly."*

We know that Zechariah was a priest, and that Elizabeth was descended from the priestly line of Aaron.

We also know they were childless, which, in itself, was a tragedy, but for a priest it was a double tragedy in that there would be no son to carry on his priestly responsibilities.

We know that they were old. How old? We don't know, old enough to be mentioned. Perhaps because it was in relation to their childbearing years or maybe they were just old.

What we do know is that they were chosen for a special assignment, and that was to raise John. This wasn't just an "oops we're pregnant, what now?" situation; this was part of God's plan.

From the very beginning this was to be a special birth and a special child.

Let's get back to the story. Luke 1:11-13, *"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 call him John."*

Now understand, there're people who don't have children because they don't want children. That's their decision. Some people don't have cats, because they don't want cats.

I can understand the not wanting children, but not wanting cats, that's just wrong.

But the reason Elizabeth didn't have a child was probably because she and Zechariah couldn't have children, not for lack of trying, or lack of wanting.

As a matter of fact, when Gabriel broke the news to Zechariah, he told him that his prayer *"has been heard."*

Now, we don't know what Elizabeth's prayers were in regard to getting pregnant at that stage in her life, but Zechariah must have still been praying for a child.

I'm pretty sure that 2000 years ago people had figured out how babies were made, and Zechariah knew they had been trying for years and it hadn't worked.

After his encounter with Gabriel, as far as we know, Zechariah went home and conveyed the message of the angel to Elizabeth which must have been interesting.

If you're familiar with the story, you know that Zechariah had lost his voice in the temple, so he had to explain all this to Elizabeth using charades.

Well, the story doesn't get into details, so I assume they did the things necessary to make a baby and it worked.

### **Slide 3**

Here in verse 13 is the first time the words "*Do not be afraid*" are mentioned in the Christmas story, but why did the angel tell Zechariah not to be afraid.

The simplest thought might be that the Angel, who identified himself as Gabriel, spooked Zechariah.

After all, Zechariah was inside the temple offering sacrifices, supposedly by himself and not only wasn't Zechariah expecting an angel, Zechariah wasn't expecting anybody.

But Gabriel didn't say, "*Don't be afraid, it's only me, and I'm an angel.*" What Gabriel said was, "*Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.*"

Gabriel wasn't just telling Zechariah that God heard his prayer; Gabriel was telling him that God had answered his prayer.

Now technically God had already answered his prayer before now. Think about it. If you asked your boss for a raise and he said, “yes,” that’s an answer.

If you asked your boss for a raise and he said, “no,” that’s also an answer. Or if you asked your boss for a raise and he said “later,” that’s also an answer.

You might not like answer number two or answer number three, but they are both answers.

Sometimes when we say, “*God didn’t answer my prayers,*” what we’re really saying is: “*God didn’t grant my request.*” Two completely different things.

So, the first lesson we learn is that prayer delayed is not prayer denied.

I wonder how many times Zechariah and his bride had questioned whether God even heard their prayers, but their son was to be born at just the right time.

We often hear that our life has a purpose. I truly believe that each of us has been placed here to make a difference.

I’m not sure that we’ll necessarily fulfil that purpose, but there’s something that only we can do if we choose to fulfil our destiny.

We might not be a Martin Luther King Jr. or a Mother Theresa, but the world would be a different place if we weren’t here.

Remember, not only were there Martin Luther Kings and Mother Theresa’s in the world, but there were also the people who quietly influenced them to become all they could be.

John's life had a purpose, but that purpose had to be served at a specific time. His preaching set the stage for Jesus.

In fact, it was a gift it was that John was born in Zechariah and Elizabeth's old age.

By the time of his death, his parents had probably passed away. They weren't around when their son was executed. They were spared that heartache.

I realize that people don't always like to hear this truth, but if you're a Christian some prayers are only answered in heaven.

You may be thinking, *"I prayed for healing for my child, my spouse, or my friend and God didn't answer that prayer, they still died."*

Listen to John's description of heaven, Revelation 21:3-4, *"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'"*

Sounds like healing to me. The reality is that very few of us, who truly believe that, wouldn't want the ones we love to miss that.

We don't grieve because our loved ones are in heaven with God, we grieve because they're not here with us.

#### **Slide 4**

Gabriel continues, Luke 1:12-17, *"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 call him 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 before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel 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 parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*

The second lesson we learn is that an answered prayer may have multiple ramifications. Gabriel told Zechariah; God has heard your prayers. But look at the ramifications that were spelled out:

- Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John.
- You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth I'm sure that Zechariah and Elizabeth had friends and family who knew how much they had longed for children.
- He will be great in the eyes of the Lord. But note what goes hand in hand with this promise. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks.
- He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth.
- He will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God.
- He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah.
- He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children.
- He will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.

What more could a priest and the daughter of a priest ask for, that their long-awaited child would be a man of God.

A man who would make a difference. A man who would prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

If you know the story of John, then you know that he was the one who announced the coming of the Messiah. He was the one who pointed to Jesus and said, *“Behold the lamb of God.”*

Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying for a child, and when that prayer was answered there were all kinds of ramifications.

Some things were seen immediately, like the birth of John and the fact that people would rejoice with them over that birth.

But other things were years in coming like his ministry and his announcement of Jesus as the Messiah. It would be thirty years before those things happened.

### **Slide 5**

The final lesson we learn is that answered prayer may have unforeseen consequences.

I’m not sure that, while Zechariah and Elizabeth were praying for a child, they were praying for dirty diapers and sleepless nights, but that’s part of the package.

Sometimes we pray for things and don’t realize the full scope of what our answered prayer will bring.

That new job that you want, it may bring extra hours, more responsibilities, more travel away from home, and temptations that wouldn’t have been there in your old position.

That’s not to say all those extra things are bad, but you may not have realized what answered prayer would look like.

When Gabriel told Zechariah in Luke 1:16-17, *“He will bring back many of the people of Israel 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 parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*

Zechariah probably had assumptions about what that would mean, after all he was a priest as was his father and his father-in-law. So, Zechariah probably assumed that John would be a priest as well.

That he probably assumed John would serve in the temple, that he would wear the ornate robes of the priesthood and would parrot the words that priests had been saying for well over a thousand years.

But listen to these descriptions of John’s ministry: Luke 1:80, *“And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.”*

Matthew 3:1-4, *“In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.”*

I’m not sure that was what Zechariah envisioned when Gabriel told him that his prayers had been heard. If you know the story, then you know that John’s preaching eventually cost him his life.

When he confronted King Herod about his immoral behavior, he was thrown into prison and eventually executed by being beheaded. I wonder if knowing that would’ve changed Zechariah’s prayers?

But understand this, John’s death wasn’t the result of Zechariah’s prayers, nor was it something for which God could be blamed.

John made choices in how he confronted Herod, I'm not saying that he shouldn't have confronted Herod, but confronting Herod had consequences.

You might say that John died a violent death as a result of his righteousness. All John had to do was back away from what he said.

If he had done that, his life would've been spared but he refused. He refused, not because he had a death wish, but because he knew what was right.

## **Slide 6**

### Conclusion

It was Edmund Burke who said, *"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."*

John wasn't willing to do nothing. His calling wasn't to obey Herod, his calling was to obey God. John's death wasn't caused by his righteousness, it was caused by evil, the evil of Herod and of his wife.

Zechariah was told to not be afraid of the answers to his prayers and each one of us need to understand that when our prayers are answered, we need to trust God to have control.

Gabriel was telling Zechariah, don't be afraid, just believe.

We have to trust that God's in control, even when things don't go the way we assumed they should have gone, even when we don't agree with it.

Don't be afraid, just believe!