

Good morning. My name is Zechariah. My name means “The Lord is Renowned”. You probably know me best as the father of John, the one you call the Baptist. As I tell you my story, I think you will agree with me that the Lord is truly renowned for the way he keeps his promises and for the way he hears the prayers of his faithful people.

My story begins when I was already an old man-as the King James Version put it, “well stricken in years.” You probably would call me a senior citizen, the kind of person to whom you give a gold watch and put into the custody of his wife. I was a priest, a man of the cloth, a priest of the division of Abijah. My good wife, Elizabeth, was a priest’s daughter-so our family enjoyed the distinction of double honor. There’s a phrase St. Luke used in telling about us. He said we were “upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.” It doesn’t suggest that we were righteous in our own right. It means that we lived the life of a faithful Jew. We were meticulous in carrying out the requirements of the law-offering up our prayers and sacrifices, joyously observing the Sabbath Days, and generally going through life trusting and praising the Lord our God. We were among the most blessed products of the Old Testament tradition.

Elizabeth and I enjoyed a great life as we served the Lord. Then my dream came true, my once-in-a-lifetime experience, the pinnacle of my career as a priest. I was chosen by lot to burn the incense on the Golden Altar in the Holy Place of the Temple. All my life as a priest I had dreamed of being called to this high, holy assignment. It would be my crowning experience!

My only regret in life was that my Elizabeth and I had no children. That hurt more than you can imagine. Elizabeth was barren, a word meaning unfulfilled, empty, unproductive. It was considered almost a disease. Some even thought of it as a curse-possibly punishment for past sins. For years and years we had prayed to God to find it in his mercy to send us a son. We prayed and we prayed and we prayed-until, well, until we had reached the time in our lives when praying for a son at our age just didn’t seem to make any sense anymore. So we quit praying for his blessing.

Now, here’s one lesson you can learn from me-one you should learn well. I had quit praying. I thought my prayer was being ignored. Sometimes, I’m sure when you pray, you feel your prayers aren’t getting through, that God isn’t listening. Well, let me tell you about that day when I ascended the steps to the Holy Place. I spread the coals on the Golden Altar and arranged the incense. And soon sweet smoke began to rise. All the people were outside, waiting, praying. You remember the phrase: “Let my prayers be set forth before you as incense.” Well, just at that moment, it happened! Right there..at the side of the altar...something that terrified me beyond anything in my life!o rise. All the people were outside, waiting, praying. You remember the phrase: “Let my prayers be set forth before you as incense.” Well, just at that moment, it happened! Right there..at the side of the altar...something that terrified me beyond anything in my life! There stood the angel of the Lord-mighty, brilliant, glorious, fearsome!

Do you know what he said to me? “Fear not, Zechariah.” You know, every time an angel appeared before God’s people in Scripture his first words were always “Fear Not”. Not surprising, is it? We are such fearful people, especially when face to face with the holiness of God or one of his messengers. “Fear not,” he said to me and then next words-and I want you to get this-were: “For your prayer has been heard.” He said this though it was long after-long after- Elizabeth and I had quit praying for a son, God had not quit on us. Our prayers had been heard. Let me assure you that your prayers are heard too-and answered by our gracious God.

The angel’s next words were unbelievable. He told me, “You and your wife Elizabeth shall have a son. My first instinct was: Come on! Be serious! After all these years? AT our age? A son? How? Why now? Before his message really began to sink it, the angel spoke of the kind of person our son

would be. He said: "He will be great in the sight of the Lord. And He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back 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 fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Think of it: this son of mine was to be used by the Lord God to usher in the long-awaited kingdom of the Messiah! Then I made the biggest mistake of my life. I doubted the angel's word. I questioned it in unbelief. It was too much for me. Perhaps I thought it was even too much even for God. In my heart I said, "No way." To the angel I said, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." Now that's something else you should learn from me. Never be "too old" or "too practical" to expect great things from God. Trust God completely. Never limit him. That's where so many people make their mistake. They short-change themselves because in their own minds they shorten God's hands. And they miss their greatest blessings.

Expect great things from God! That which please him most is putting your faith and trust in him. It opens the door to every blessing he wants to give you. Really that's what it all boils down to: Unbelief is our greatest sin-and faith is his greatest gift. It's the key to life in Christ also for you.

God was merciful to me. The mighty Christmas angel said, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you, and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not be able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

I have no idea how long all of this lasted, but the people outside the Temple were becoming edgy as they waited for me to appear. It could have been a long time, but to me it seemed like just a few minutes. Then I went out to the people. I tried to speak to them, but it was no use! No matter how I tried I couldn't get a word out! So I motioned with my hands-and they understood that I had seen a vision. Can you imagine the situation? A preacher-speechless! A new father to be-speechless! At one of the proudest moments of my life-and I couldn't say a word. I had a great message to tell people, all the while just bursting inside, with so much to tell- but speechless!

I should have known that when God speaks it's as good as accomplished. WE Hebrews even had a special idiom in our language called "the prophetic future." Things still in the future were spoken of as having already taken place. The prophet Isaiah used to speak like this a lot. Even though he was talking about the Savior who wasn't yet born, he could say, "Surely, he has born our grief and carried our sorrows." You see, we were so sure of the Word of God, his faithfulness to his promises, that we knew you could be absolutely rock-solid sure. When God spoke it was as good as done. Don't make my mistake. Ponder the promises of God in that way, as though they have already happened. Take great pleasure and find power in what he says he will do for you. His promises are sure and certain.

You know, of course, that everything I was told by the angel was 100% true. Elizabeth did conceive. Then something happened that was even more miraculous. Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy when her favorite cousin, Mary, came to visit. She told us of her own amazing experience. God's angel Gabriel had come to her-and had announced to her that she was to be the mother of the Lord Christ! Her son, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, would be the Son of the Most High God. Now that turned out to be the greatest Good news anyone in the world will ever hear.

We were ecstatic with joy. The Messiah was coming-in our lifetime! The covenant promises were being fulfilled- and we were given a part in their fulfillment. WE danced with joy with mary, would be the Mother of our Lord. Elizabeth even said that our baby in her womb leaped for joy at Mary's word. And I-all I could do was make motions, smile, cry for joy. I was still speechless.

Then came the day when our son was born. My son! Can you believe it? My son, the apple of my eye; my prayer come true. He was everything the angel had promised. He was so very special. One day, Jesus, whose Way he would prepare, would call him "The greatest man born of woman."

When he was eight days old we naturally arranged for the rabbi to come to our house for circumcision. My son would wear the mark of the covenant in his flesh. All our relatives were there-cousins, nephews, nieces-and friends and neighbors joined us, too. It was on this occasion that our son would be given his name. The others wanted to honor me and suggested that he be called Zechariah, after me. But Elizabeth said, "No, no. He is to be called John." They were surprised. John? Why John? They came to be and I settled the matter. I took an old wax tablet-remember, I was speechless-and I wrote what have been called the first written words of the New Testament: "His name is John."

I had no sooner laid down the tablet when I felt a tingle in my throat. My mind was racing, and I knew my tongue had been loosed-as the angel said. I found I could speak for the first time in more than nine months. But that wasn't all. Surrounding this event there was great fear, awe, respect, amazement and holy wonder. People began to say things, things like "Wow! What kind of child will this be?" and "Surely the Lord God is with him!" And suddenly I was filled to the brim with the Holy Spirit of God. All of those months of silence ended-what would I say? What would I sing to the Lord? There were tears of joy running down my cheeks. My dear wife, Elizabeth, stood at my side. It was the happiest moment of my life! Together we held our son, cradled in our arms.

It was not just because of the birth of our longed for son, John, that I was so overwhelmed. I was thinking also about what the angel had said, about what was about to take place. I thought of Mary's greater Son: I remembered the history of our people, the longing of the ages, the crying of the prophets of the Lord, the sacred Scriptures, and the covenant of blessing. The answer to our prayers, the one who would fill every human need, was being given right before our eyes. It was the fullness of time. God was coming to earth to redeem his people.

The inspired song I sang is called the Benedictus after its first word in Latin. "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, I sang, "for he has visited and redeemed his people. That's something to sing about-also for you, to whom the Good News of Jesus has come. God came down to earth. That's Christmas. You sing different words today, but you feel the joy, too, don't you? Peace and mercy mild! God and sinners reconciled. From heaven above to earth he comes. A great and mighty wonder. Joy to the world, the Lord has come.

Well, I suppose I should get going now. I'm told you folks now days have a lot of things to get ready for Christmas. And I certainly can understand. You want to make everything as beautiful as possible to honor your King, your Savior. But please don't forget that God has already done everything to make it Christmas and fill you with joy. He's given you his Son. And nothing you do will ever make Christmas more exciting than that. You are the most blessed people in the world. Amen.