

God Keeps His Promises

Malachi 4:1-6, Romans 4:16-25, Luke 1:5-25

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One of the characteristics of God in comparison with human beings, at least as far as the Scriptures are concerned, is that God keeps his promises, while human beings are known for not doing this. The promises of God are directed towards his intention of bringing full redemption to the whole of creation. And God expects us to know that he keeps his promises, and can thus be trusted, that is, relied upon to do what he says he will do.

Our story in Luke opens in the time of Herod, king of Judea. Now one of the disadvantages of the way our English Bible is arranged is that the gospels of Matthew and Mark come before Luke. If this was not the case, then the connection between the end of the Old Testament, in the last chapter of Malachi, and the beginning of the New Testament, that is, the earliest narrative chronologically, in the first chapter of Luke. If we look at the beginning of Matthew, we see the genealogy of Jesus, and then immediately there comes the story of how the birth of Jesus came about, starting with the discovery of Mary's pregnancy. In Mark, there is the blunt statement that John the Baptist came before Jesus, fulfilling the prediction of the prophet Isaiah.

But in Luke, we read the story of a priest named Zechariah. This story is chronologically prior to the opening narratives in Matthew and Mark, and of course John's gospel lacks any narrative of the birth of Jesus. Now the tribe of Levites who were the priests of Israel, and only a Levite could be a priest, although not all Levites were priests. The priests performed the ceremonies in the Temple in Jerusalem, and taught the law of God to the people. But not all the priests could serve in the temple at once; there were too many of them for that. So they were, in contemporary terms, put on a roster, so they each had their turn at serving in the temple. Zechariah, the focus of this story, was one of the division of Abijah, that is, the team rostered for temple duty named after Abijah, one of the early priests. Both Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, also a member of the priestly tribe of Aaron, were upright in the sight of God, obedient to the commandments, and living blameless lives. But in spite of their

faithfulness and devotion to God, they were without children, and they were both well advanced in years. For an Israelite to be childless was not just unfortunate, as people today may feel in that situation. It was a triple disadvantage.

Firstly, the labour needed to care for crops and animals, to provide food and other necessities of life, required the contributions of each member of the family. Where there were only the married couple, the labour available for the necessary work was thereby limited. Also, there was no formal social welfare system in Israel, and those who were elderly were dependent on their children to support and provide for them in their old age. While there were commandments in the Law to care for the poor and the elderly, this was a work of charity and not something that could be relied on, as the people of Israel did not always provide for the poor. Secondly, having children, and especially sons, to carry on the family name, was seen as important in maintaining the place of the family within the tribes of Israel. There are many stories in the Old Testament of various situations where sons were not able to continue the family name, and the consequences this brought for the structure of society. And in this regard the special blessing of God on David, the king, was that he would never lack an heir to sit on the throne of Israel as king. He was guaranteed a line of descendants as a special promise of God, a promise that was kept in Jesus, who as King in David's line now reigns as King forever, thereby ensuring that this promise can never be broken. This formed one of the central points in the message of Gabriel to Mary, when he announced the forthcoming birth of Jesus. Thirdly, and most importantly, to be childless meant that the hope of bearing a son who would be the Messiah, or children from whom would come the Messiah, was the greatest hope of anyone in Israel. To be childless meant that this was of course, impossible. And it is this hope of bearing a son who would be the Messiah which plays a central part in the opening chapter of Luke. And consider the contrasts between the two narratives: two women, both without children, become pregnant in unexpected circumstances, and bear sons who would play the central roles in the hopes and dreams of every faithful Israelite: Elizabeth, elderly and past hope of ever having a child, and Mary, young and not expecting to have a child, at least not yet, since she was not even married, and obviously from her response to the announcement by the angel would not have countenanced getting pregnant without being married. So the first chapter of Luke concerns two women who had no expectation of being pregnant, who suddenly found

themselves in that condition, and found refuge with each other in their incredible situation.

So Zechariah, taking his turn in his rostered duty as a priest, was chosen by lot to burn incense before the Lord in the temple. It seems that because of the great number of priests who served in the temple, that this privilege was limited so that no priest undertook this duty more than once in a lifetime. So it was not simply a matter of who had a turn this particular day to burn the incense, it was Zechariah's chance, his only chance, to enter into the Holy Place before the Lord, to be the closest he would ever be to the Holy of Holies where God's presence was made manifest, literally the chance of a lifetime, the pinnacle of his career. That he had to wait until he was a very old man probably added special poignancy to the situation, as he may well have missed out altogether had he died before his rostered turn came around again.

The burning of incense was the height of the daily sacrificial ceremonies in the temple. After the sacrificing of the animals, the priest who had been chosen entered the Holy Place to burn the incense before the Lord, while all the people outside waited and prayed. The burning of incense was symbolic of the offering of prayers to God, and the rising of the incense smoke represented prayers ascending to heaven. It was a special and sacred time. Suddenly, while Zechariah was concentrating on his special once in a lifetime moment, an angel appeared standing on the right side of the altar of incense. According to some scholars, the altar of incense stood on the left of the Holy Place, so that an angel standing on the right side of the altar stood closest to the Holy of Holies where the presence of God was manifested, and so could have come from there.

Zechariah was startled, and gripped with fear. Many of us have in recent years become so accustomed to the numerous pictures and ornaments of angels on sale in so many shops, without exception trashy and sentimental rubbish, that we have come to see angels as domesticated and rather tame and anaemic creatures. That is not at all how the Scriptures portray them. There, they are almost universally described as instilling fear and terror in those who see them. Angels are not the soft romantic visions of flowing gowns and pastel coloured wings, but are the terrifying soldiers of God, who are more likely to be wearing armour and engaged in battle with other

spiritual beings in rebellion against God, than spending time playing gentle music and gathering flowers in the meadows, as we more often see them in contemporary depictions. Strangely enough, one of the few passages where a visit from an angel did not inspire fear was in Mary, the next story in this chapter of Luke. While Mary was disturbed by the message, it does not record that she was smitten with fear or terror when the angel appeared, but of course that does not mean that this was not the case – the poor girl may have been petrified at such an appearance, let alone at the message that the angel brought! But returning to Zechariah – he was startled out of his wits, and terrified. “Don’t be afraid” said the angel. Almost every appearance of an angel starts with these words – and Gabriel even had to tell Mary this same comfort – “Don’t be afraid.” This in itself indicates the kind of response that angels evoked when they appeared. So in typical fashion the angel has to start by putting Zechariah at ease so he can take in the message he was about to receive. There’s not a lot of point in passing on an important message if the person you are speaking to is so terrified they aren’t paying any attention to what you say!

Then the angel tells Zechariah that his prayer has been heard. What prayer was that? The next words of the angel announce that he and his wife Elizabeth were going to have a son, who would be the forerunner of the Messiah. This was no doubt the answered prayer that Zechariah had been longing for these many years, but is this the prayer that was meant? Surely not, for Zechariah had been offering the prayers of the whole people of Israel. It was not his place when standing in the Holy Place to be offering a purely personal prayer for himself and his wife – he was there representing the people of God within the House of God – not a time for personal matters to come to the fore. So it would seem that the prayer the angel referred to was the prayer offered with the incense – that God would send his redeemer to restore Israel and deliver the people of God from their oppressors – the occupying Roman army. But in the marvellous way that God acts, these two prayers of Zechariah come together in the one response from God – you pray for a redeemer – I am sending you a redeemer; you prayer for a son – I am sending you a son who will prepare the way for the redeemer. Thus both Zechariah’s prayers, his representative prayers for the coming of a redeemer on the part of the whole people of Israel, and his personal prayers for a son, were answered together.

The angel promises that the son that Elizabeth will bear will bring rejoicing to many, not least his parents, not just as any child brings delight and rejoicing, but because of his greatness in the sight of the Lord. Remember that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were well advanced in years, and it is unlikely that they lived to see the part that John played in the redemptive acts of God on behalf of Israel, and of course not just Israel, but the whole world. But they would recognise in him someone who would be great in the sight of God, and even his manner of life, in his consecration to God, would be surpassed through his being filled with the Spirit of God even from his birth. And of course you will recall from the following story that when Mary went to visit Elizabeth, the baby within her leaped for joy at the sound of Mary's voice – another sign of the special bond between the child of Mary and the child of Elizabeth.

But the special task of John was still to be announced by the angel – he was to bring the people of Israel back to their covenant with God; to restore them to obedience and faith, and to turn them away from their sins. He would be like another Elijah, filled with the same power and spirit, surely something that would have filled the ruling powers with trepidation had they known it, for Elijah was notorious for his piercing condemnation of the sins of the kings and queens of Israel, such as Ahab and Jezebel, and was in constant conflict with them because of their persistent idolatry and covenant-breaking. Elijah performed great feats of power in Israel, and outside it, and became the paradigm of the prophets, being the representative of the prophets and spoken of in combination with Moses, the giver of the law. The phrase “Moses and Elijah” was synonymous with “the Law and the Prophets.” So the coming of a second Elijah was more than anyone could have hoped for short of the coming of the Messiah himself. And the task of this new Elijah was to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. This repeats the great passages read in Advent such as Isaiah 40: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.” This expectation was to be fulfilled in John.

So what does Zechariah do? He was in the midst of the most important act of the most important day of his life, the pinnacle of his hopes and his career, when all of a sudden he is interrupted by a terrifying angel telling him the most incredible news that he could scarcely have hoped ever to hear. In the middle of the temple, next to the Holy of Holies where God's presence was manifested, faced with God's messenger

giving this incredible news, what does Zechariah say? “How can I be sure you are right? Don’t you know that I and my wife are old, well past the age of having children?” Now angels are not exactly the most placid creatures, as I have explained, so it was taking something of a risk to suggest to this fear-inspiring being that maybe there was a chance that he was mistaken. While there had been occasions when angels were remarkably tolerant of doubts and uncertainty – witness Gideon as one prime example – in this instance the angel took exception to the suggestion that maybe he hadn’t got his facts right, or had overlooked the major impediment posed by the age of Zechariah and Elizabeth, or maybe he had his appointments muddled and turned up to speak to the wrong person – who knows what Zechariah was thinking, but in any event the angel wasn’t having any of that. “How dare you doubt me, don’t you know that I am Gabriel, and I stand in the presence of God, and that God himself sent me to tell you this news?” As a result of disbelieving the angel, Zechariah was struck dumb until the son who had been promised was born.

But before we get too engrossed in the response of the angel, let’s consider for a moment something that Zechariah should have borne in mind. Remember that the prophetic voice in Israel had been silenced for four hundred years – in all that time there had been no prophets, no message from God, no indication that God had been paying attention to their prayers, nothing – everything continued as it had for years, with Israel under the thumb of the Persians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Syrians and now the Romans. And while they had a king, he was not a true king of Israel but Herod, an Idumean, who claimed to be king of Israel but had no right to the title, and was king only through the patronage of Rome as a puppet ruler. He was hated by the people of Israel who longed to be rid of him and the Romans, to put one of their own on the throne. So it was with this special poignancy that Luke records that it was in the time of Herod, King of Judea (not King of Israel, the nation of God’s people, but King of Judea, the name of the Roman province) that this announcement took place. In this situation, where was the sign of the promised redeemer?

But Zechariah failed to recall the last words of prophecy recorded in Israel: the closing verses of Malachi which we have heard read for us this morning. And it is these closing verses of Malachi which the angel cited to Zechariah, which he should have recognised. God had promised to send Elijah to prepare the people of Israel, and

to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. And not only that Zechariah should have recalled the message of Malachi; he should also have realised that angels did not appear all that often, in fact this was the first time for centuries that an angel had been sent from God with a message for Israel. And he should have been aware that to doubt the word of an angel was taking a significant risk. So Zechariah was struck dumb, and would remain that way until the words of the angel had been fulfilled.

So what on earth was he to do next? He could no longer offer prayers, he could not continue debating with the angel, so the only thing he could do was to leave. How poignant that must have been, to end his once in a lifetime chance to offer incense and prayer next to the very Holy of Holies where the presence of God was manifested to Israel, having been struck dumb for doubting the word of an angel sent to him from the presence of God with a message about the coming redeemer. That which he had longed for all his life was about to come to pass, and he couldn't tell anyone a single thing about it! Imagine the frustration and anxiety which must have built up within him!

So what happened after he left the temple? Outside, everyone was waiting for him to return, and they were wondering why he was taking so long. The next responsibility of the priest offering the incense was to pronounce the Aaronic blessing over the people to conclude the service of worship; so they were left waiting for the conclusion of the worship while Zechariah experienced his encounter with the angel. One possibility which must have run through many minds was that he had been struck dead as a result of entering the presence of God in unrighteousness; that he had had an encounter with an angel, or some similar experience, would probably have been the last thing that occurred to them, given the length of time since any such event had last occurred. So when he did finally appear, unable to speak, they grasped that something unusual had happened, as he made signs to them. It is possible that we are missing something in the translation here: rather than "making signs" we would probably have said he was making wild and frantic gestures – which seemed to have communicated the fact that he had seen something unusual, but nobody had any idea what it was.

Zechariah stayed on at the temple to complete his rostered duties, no doubt with much whispering and gossip around him from all the other priests and the Levites serving in the temple, not to mention the people who had been present at the service when he had seen the angel. Unless he had written down an account of his experience, they would not have had any idea what had happened. But after his rostered tour of duty was complete, he returned home, and subsequently Elizabeth became pregnant, and went into seclusion for five months. Her only recorded response to these things, at this point in time, was to express her praise and gratitude to God for taking away her disgrace and giving her a child.

What then became of this situation? As we know, the child they bore was named John, who became the one to announce the coming of the Messiah, the world's Redeemer, Jesus. He was called the Baptist, and became a prophet of considerable reputation, who eventually was killed by Herod, not the same Herod whom we met at the start of this story, but one of his sons. After the birth of John, Zechariah was able to speak again, and told everyone what had been announced by the angel. Not only that, he was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied in the name of the Lord about the fulfilment of God's promise to bring redemption to Israel.

The story of Zechariah leads us into the rest of the narratives of the birth of Jesus, as a fitting introduction, tying this in to the conclusion of the Old Testament written four hundred years earlier. It is a clear demonstration that not only was God sending his Son to bring about the world's redemption, but that this was being done clearly and explicitly in fulfilment of his promise to do so. The first part of the birth narratives shows how the prophecy of Malachi was quoted by the angel Gabriel, to show that what was about to take place was not simply the act of God, but the fulfilment of the promises of God.

So what can we then learn from this story? I believe there are two strong messages here for us as we enter into this Advent season. Firstly, God keeps his promises. It may have been hundreds of years since the promise had been given, but at the right time the promise was fulfilled. God can be relied upon, he can be trusted, and believed on, to do that which he has promised to do. Secondly, we are called to trust that God will fulfil his promises, and to believe in him regardless of the seeming

delays. The people of Israel did not abandon hope, even though their hope became somewhat confused, and they no longer saw the promised redeemer as one who would bring salvation to the whole world, but one whose primary role was to liberate Israel from their Roman oppressors. We too can become confused about the meaning and intention of God's promises, and start to see the promises of God as focused on our benefit, our comfort and convenience. We get disappointed and disillusioned when we expect things to happen that do not come about; unlike Zechariah and Elizabeth who still trusted and believed in God, even though they remained childless: they no longer expected to receive a child, but did not lose their faith or trust in God in spite of the lack of answer to their prayers. The promises of God for his people are focused not on our personal blessing and convenience, but on the achievement of God's purposes. He has a goal of bringing redemption to the whole of creation, not just to pick out a few here and there for a blessed future life in heaven.

And what of those who did not live to see the promises fulfilled? The gap between the prophecy of Malachi and its fulfilment with the birth of John was over four hundred years; that between the prophecies of Isaiah and the birth of Jesus around eight hundred years. We live in an age where we are prone to expect immediate gratification of our wishes and desires. How would we handle a delay of hundreds of years for the fulfilment of the promises of God?

It is only by trusting in God, as a faithful, trustworthy, covenant-keeping God, that we will be able to remain strong in faith. God fulfils his promises, and has always shown himself faithful in the past. We have then every confidence that that which he has promised for the future at the return of Christ will also be fulfilled. Let us then remain steadfast in faith, trusting in a God who is faithful and trustworthy, and look for the fulfilment of his promises, without despair or disillusionment if it does not come within our lifetime- for it is certain that it will come, and those who do not live to see it will, as Scripture teaches, be raised in glory to share in the fulfilment of all that God has promised. As we enter this time of Advent, let us focus our attention on the faithfulness of God in keeping the promises he has made, as we so richly see in the narratives of the birth of John and Jesus and all that came to pass at that time. God is faithful; let us remain faithful to him no matter what comes our way.