

SERIES: The Christmas Story – A Look at the “Second String” (Slide #1)

TITLE: Zachariah, the Father of John

TEXT: Luke 1:1-25

DATE: December 2, 2007 – First Sunday of Advent

I. INTRODUCTION.

- A. Well, here we are again. Another year has come and gone, another Thanksgiving has come and gone, and we have arrived where we do every year: The annual celebration of the Birth of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.
1. For the Christian, the four Sundays of Advent only have one other period of time equal in importance: Lent leading up to Easter.
 2. This is our season, it is our holiday, these are our special days, and it is a time to celebrate.
 3. **Illustration:** I’m reminded of the story I read several years ago. It was just a few days before Christmas and two ladies were standing outside looking into the window of a department store. Inside the window was a large display of the manger scene with clay figures of baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, and the animals. Disgustedly, one lady said to the other: *“Look at that, the church trying to horn in on Christmas.”*
 4. One can almost feel that way some times – like talking about the true meaning of Christmas is an intrusion into our worlds traditions, but let us not be mistaken: **THIS IS OUR HOLIDAY – THE ANNUAL CELEBRATION OF THE BIRTHDAY OF THE MESSIAH.**
 5. Oh, we are all fully aware of all the other aspects of the month of December – the gift giving, the parties, the eating, the decorating, and more.
 6. They represent some of the fun side of Christmas and there is absolutely nothing wrong with all of those things, if not done in excess.
 7. But let’s be clear: all of those other things are bonuses; the real cause for our celebration is none other than **JESUS** and His miraculous birth for the purpose of saving mankind from their sins and offering to them the gift of eternal life in heaven.
- B. While this is our time of year and it is filled with excitement, I’ll be honest with you: every year when Advent rolls around I find myself asking the question: What further can be said about a story that has been looked at and preached on for over 2,000 years?
1. The story never changes: John the Baptist is still born to Zachariah and Elizabeth, Jesus is still born to Joseph and Mary, the birth still takes place in a manger, angels still appear to shepherds and the shepherds still come to the manger as the first witnesses of Jesus, and wise men still travel for over two years to see the new born king.
 2. The significance of the story never changes: Jesus’ coming marks the beginning of God’s miraculous rescue operation of mankind.
 3. The story never changes. We know the basics. Most likely no one here this morning has not heard the story of Christmas.
 4. And so like every year I find myself asking the question: is there another side of Christmas that can be explored that can take an exciting and familiar story and look at it from a fresh angle?
- C. Well, the answer is YES.
- D. In the end, as we move on into the month of December, we will end our celebration with a look at the main character, Jesus, but in the weeks leading up to that time, this year I want us to take a look at what might be called “the second string heroes.”
1. They are participants in the unfolding drama of the Christmas story that we are familiar with, but what’s their story and what can we learn from them?

2. Or, another way of putting it is like this: What can we learn from the stories of the backup players in the Christmas Drama? What can we learn from them about life? In what ways can we identify with those who were a part of the original Christmas drama?
- E. Well, there's no better place to turn than Luke's account, because it was written to a person who is just like us: Theophilus.
1. How is he like us?
 2. Simply this: Theophilus was one who knew the stories of Christianity – he just wondered if it was true and what it meant.
 3. We read in the prologue to Luke's gospel these words: **(Slide #2)** *“Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”*
- F. This morning I want to invite each and every one of us to take on different identities: I invite all of us to become THEOPHILUS. Since that's such a challenging name, let's do this: (Slide #3) let's all become THEO.
1. We've all heard the story of Christmas.
 2. We know something about the main characters.
 3. But let's look a little deeper.
 4. Let's – for want of a better expression – put on the shoes of the second string players of the Christmas drama and search for points of identification.
 5. We begin our journey together by looking at the first second string hero: ZACK - more commonly known as Zechariah.

II. **(Slide #4) Zechariah – the story on the surface.**

- A. Follow with me in your bibles as we look at the words of Luke 1:5-25.
1. As we read the words of Luke, he begins the story of Christianity with the account of Zechariah.
 2. NOTE THIS: One sure sign that you might be a second string hero in a story is when the heading that precedes your story doesn't even have your name in it. The heading in my bible reads: “The birth of John the Baptist.”
- B. The story line goes like this:
1. **Verse 5** opens by offering to us a historical marker for the story: In was in the time of Herod, king of Israel.
 2. During the reign of Herod, we are told that there was a man by the name of Zechariah and we are offered some biographical information:
 - a. He is a priest in the Abijah division – one of 24 priestly divisions that served the people.
 - b. He is married to a woman by the name of Elizabeth who is a descendant of Aaron – the Old Testament line of priests.
 - c. He, along with his wife is upright in the eyes of God and blameless in obeying the Lord's commandments – pretty high praise.
 - d. He and his wife do not have any children.
 - e. He and his wife are senior adults.
 3. Having noted the time and having offered a brief biographical sketch of our subject, Zach, Luke begins to tell his story:
 - a. Once, the details of the story begins with these seemingly simple words: *“Once, when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before the God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.”* (vss. 8-10)

- b. Here is what is meant by these words:
- (1) It is the scheduled time of year – a one week period – for the Abijah division of priests to serve the people.
 - (2) Since there were 24 divisions of priests and roughly 9,000 priests who were serving during that time, this means that Zechariah was one of around 375 priests on duty during that week.
 - (3) During the week, prayers were offered for the people twice a day – once in the morning and once in the evening.
 - (4) As the people gathered outside of the holy of holies and prayed, the priest chosen by lot – a drawing of straws if you will – would go into the temple to burn incense.
 - (5) Now do the math: there were 375 priests in each division, each division served a couple of times a year, and of the 375 priests, only 14 entered into the inner part of the temple to offer incense to the Lord for the people. (A priest on the average only got to do this twice in their life time)
 - (6) As the chosen priests did their duties, the symbolism of the burning of incense was that the rising smoke carried the prayers of the people to God.
 - (7) So Zechariah, in one of only two times in his lifetime, is burning the incense of prayers in the holy of holies when, to his surprise an angel of the Lord appears before him with an announcement: *“Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and a delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, 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, 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.”*
 - (8) Get the setting here: Zechariah is offering up prayers to God, including his own, and at that moment God answers Zechariah’s prayer.
 - (9) Now catch Zach’s answer: (paraphase) You’re kidding.
 - (10) Gabriel, the messenger answers pretty strong: Listen, I just came from standing in the presence of God Himself and I’m telling you what He said. I can’t believe you are doubting me. So from now on you will not speak until the birth of your son.
 - (11) Coming out of the temple, the people waited anxiously because he was in there longer than normal. Perhaps they were thinking that he would come out with some announcement in terms of a response to their prayers.
 - (12) Instead he came out unable to speak and remained that way until the birth of his son.
 - (13) As we will learn later, this son is in fact no ordinary son: He is John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ spoken of in the Old Testament.
 - (14) Thus begins the story of the plan of salvation, a story that begins with a man by the name of Zechariah along with his wife Elizabeth.

III. (Slide #5) Zechariah – a man just like us

- A. The story alone is an exciting story, especially as we read on and discover who this child of Zechariah and Elizabeth truly is: the fore runner of Christ who was promised hundreds of years in advance.
- B. But this morning I want us to spend some time looking deeper into the live of Zechariah.
- C. As we do so, we discover something about Zechariah that is helpful to all of us - we find a man who struggled with issues that we struggle with; we discover a man who is just like us.

D. How so?

1. **(Slide #6) First, we see in Zechariah a man who had to make a decision concerning how he would respond to God in hard times; when things weren't going the way they wanted. What do I mean?**
 - a. Well, on the surface, the story of Zechariah as it begins is just details – it's time for his division to serve as priest and he get to burn the incense representing the prayers of the people.
 - b. But there was an issue in Zechariah's life – Elizabeth's as well.
 - c. You see, one might say that Zach had a problem – and his problem was with God.
 - d. The problem went something like this:
 - (1) For years and years Zechariah had served the Lord faithfully as a priest – he had done so all of his life.
 - (2) For years and years Zechariah and Elizabeth had lived lives that were upright in the sight of God – God noticed it.
 - (3) For years and years Zechariah and Elizabeth had followed the commands of the Lord to the "T" – their observance of the commands of the Lord was blameless.
 - (4) To put it bluntly: the life that Zechariah and Elizabeth lived was one deserving of recognition – perhaps even honor.
 - (5) So what's the issue? It's this: in spite of all that Zechariah and Elizabeth had done, God didn't seem to appreciate all of their noteworthy living.
 - (6) How? Simply this: He wouldn't give to them children and to be childless in their culture was an embarrassment. God was "shaming them" by refusing to give them this one little thing: a son.
 - (7) It was so embarrassing that Luke brought it up: "But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years."
 - e. Let's be honest: most likely all of us know what it feels like to think at times that God owes us – sometimes He owes us big time.
 - (1) We've served him for years – putting in countless hours doing things for Him.
 - (2) We've given money sacrificially to the point of having to give up personal pleasures along the way.
 - (3) We've been obedient to Him and all of His commands.
 - (4) But then something comes along – someone comes down with cancer, a child turns rebellious, everything in the house breaks at the same time after giving all of our money to God the week before, or something like that.
 - (5) We fall on our knees before God and nothing happens. Our temptation at the time is to say to God: "GOD, YOU OWE ME BIG TIME. WHY AREN'T YOU GIVING ME WHAT I NEED. . . WHAT I WANT?"
 - f. The hard question to answer is this: What will we do with God if He doesn't give us what we want. Will we still serve Him?
 - g. Zechariah's story just looks like a story, but there's more to it. I have to believe that almost every day as he served the Lord there were times when he asked the question, "Why won't God give us a son in light of all that we've done for Him.
 - h. As I read the story of Zechariah, looking behind the scene of the surface story, I discover a man who models something important. Zechariah makes a choice: **I WILL SERVE THE LORD EVEN IF HE GIVES ME NOTHING IN RETURN.** Because of that, my friends, I want you to know that we have in Zechariah a man who may be a second string player in the drama of the birth of Christ, but he's first string in his decision to follow God no matter what – he serves as a model to each of us.
 - i. The lesson of Zechariah is that God deserves to be served and loved no matter what – even

when things don't seem to go our way.

2. **(Slide #7) Second, we see in Zechariah a man who had to determine who he was going to please in life: God or man.**
 - a. While perhaps stretching slightly, I do believe that we see an important lesson in the wording of verses 6 and 7.
 - b. As was read earlier, verse 6 says, *“Both of them (Zechariah and Elizabeth) were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.”*
 - c. As we move to verse 7, the verse begins in a curious way: it begins with the word “BUT.”
 - d. Reading on Luke states, *“But. . . they had no children because Elizabeth was barren; and they were well along in years.”*
 - e. Again, I may be stretching a little here, but not much. There seems to be a desire on the part of Luke to create a contrast. The contrast goes something like this:
 - (1) **Verse 6** – God’s view – Zechariah and Elizabeth are upright in God’s eyes.
 - (2) **Verse 7** – Man’s view – Zechariah and Elizabeth must not be upright in God’s eyes because they have no children.
 - f. The question that arises from these contrasting statements is this: Who will Zechariah and Elizabeth strive to please?
 - g. The answer seems evident in this story – they lived their lives in a way to please God and not man.
 - h. Again, let’s be honest, all of us at some time in our lives find ourselves struggling with this dilemma: Will I live in such a way to please God or man?
 - (1) In our hearts we would say that we long to serve God.
 - (2) But the pressures come and those pressures tell us to do certain things if we are to be pleasing to our fellow mankind – and often those pressures are even to do good things that on the surface seem holy.
 - (3) Perhaps we are pressured to perform some church task or pressured to accept some calling in life or pressured to hold on to something we know God is telling us to let go of and move on.
 - (4) When the pressures on, the lesson of Zechariah is that it is more important to please God than mankind any day of the week.
 - (5) Will we be second guessed? YES. Will we at times be labeled as not as spiritual? YES. Will we be criticized at times? Absolutely.
 - i. The lesson Zechariah and Elizabeth is the call to choose well – they chose to serve and please God even at the risk of not looking quite so well in the eyes of mankind. So must we.
3. **(Slide #8) Third (and discovered in these same two verses) we see in Zechariah a man who went to the right place to discover “eternal life.”**
 - a. This third lesson is not so obvious to our ears, but would have made complete sense to Theophilus in Luke’s day.
 - b. Having no children for a Jew in the days of Christ was much more than a matter of favor or even good fortune – it had to do with eternal life.
 - c. You see, in the days of Zechariah, the majority of the Jews did not believe in life after death.
 - d. For the Jew in that day, eternal life was a term related to family lineage: you gained eternal life by eternally passing on the family name through a son.
 - e. The shame was not in not having a child; the shame was in no longer living – the family name had died.
 - f. As we hear of this tradition, there may be a temptation to be critical and say that these people were seeking the wrong things to gain eternal life, but not so fast:
 - (1) Are we not prone as a society to seek other pathways to eternal life?
 - (2) We seek the pathways of good deeds, or kindness, or generosity, or some other human

invention.

- g. While Zechariah did not yet know of the coming Messiah, we do know that he clearly looked to God for life – even life eternal.
- 4. **(Slide #9) Fourth and finally, we see in Zechariah a classic struggle in matching together prayer and faith.**
 - a. How fascinating to me is this account.
 - b. For years Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed and longed for a child.
 - c. Here is Zechariah, chosen by lot to go into the holy of holies to burn incense symbolic of prayer being sent to heaven.
 - d. In this time of prayer – if you will – an answer finally came and Zechariah doubted.
 - e. Zechariah’s struggle is all of our struggle. All of us at times have trouble praying and actually believing that God answers prayer.
 - f. When God does answer prayer, at times it can be so shocking that we have a hard time even remembering that we ask for the very thing we received.
 - g. Zechariah was rebuked for his lack of faith, and most likely we would be.
- E. As we look into the life of Zechariah a little deeper, how we identify with his life and struggles, and how we can learn from his example.
- F. I come, just briefly, to one last observation. It’s a good news announcement from Zach’s story. . .

IV. **(Slide #10) Zechariah – A good news announcement from His story.**

- A. What I love in the end of Zechariah’s story – with all of his struggles and decisions and challenges of life – is this exciting truth: In the end, God demonstrated His great love for an ordinary person by choosing to use Zechariah and Elizabeth to birth the fore runner of Christ.
- B. I love that thought because it says to me – and hopefully to you – something very important: to those of us who are just ordinary folks learning how to walk with Jesus with all of it’s nuances, God can do great things through us, if we’ll let Him.
- C. That’s exciting. That’s encouraging. That’s motivating. That’s gospel.
- D. The challenge:
 - 1. Hold on to God even when it at times seems like things are not going well.
 - 2. Strive to please God, not mankind. It’s the right thing to do, even when we are at times questioned.
 - 3. Seek God and His righteousness – He is the only true source for eternal life.
 - 4. Pray and believe.
- E. Then just wait and see what God will do. . . .even through you and me.