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***Good News!***  
***Second Sunday of Advent***  
***Isaiah 52:7; Luke 1:19***

1. Good News Comes to Those Who **Need** It
2. Good News Comes to Those Who **Listen** for It
3. Good News **Leaves** Us **Speechless**
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5. Good News Brings **Joy**, **Delight**, and **Impact**

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West Valley Church  
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12/10/17

**Good News!**  
**Second Sunday of Advent<sup>1</sup>**  
*Isaiah 52:7; Luke 1:19*

Merry Christmas and thank you for coming together for another special Sunday morning during this Advent season.

Let's prepare our hearts by praying together.

*Prayer*

The theme of our Advent season for 2017 is "Good News!" 2,750 years ago, Isaiah the prophet wrote this in the Old Testament:

"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" (Isaiah 52:7, niv)

At Advent we celebrate the arrival of the Good News, and for each of the Sunday messages in December, we are looking at some instances of those who brought us the message of "Good News!"

Last week we explored the incredible depth of insight that Gospel writer Mark gave us in the opening line of his book which says:

"The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."  
(Mark 1:1).

We learned that in Jesus Christ, God did a new work that was just as significant as the creation of the universe, bringing light into darkness and turning the chaos of our lives into order, and we learned that the work that Christ does for us is even more liberating than when God set his people free from slavery in Egypt. We learned that Jesus could do this because he is the Son of God.

With that Good News of God's love for us in mind, today we are going to see another instance of someone bringing the message of Good News to us. Today we are looking at one of the times the Good News was given through a winged delivery system; in other words, the Good News came from an angel.

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<sup>1</sup> Primary sources:

Ken Heer, *Luke: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007)

William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1975)

David A. Neale, *New Beacon Bible Commentary: Luke 1-9, A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2011)

It is recorded for us in Luke's Gospel, in the first part of chapter one. It is describing the circumstances before the conception and birth of John the Baptist. Remember, John the Baptist was the person who came before Jesus Christ, the Son of God. John would prepare the way for Jesus by calling people to repent and prepare their hearts and lives for Jesus' arrival. The importance of John was prophesied about in the Old Testament (Isaiah 40:3-5; Malachi 3:1, 4:5). John's ministry would be a precursor to Jesus. Would you help us all to honor God's Word and stand with me as I read for us the story? It is from Luke, chapter one:

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. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before 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.

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. 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."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

The angel said to him, "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 able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. (Luke 1:5-22, niv)

This is an incredible story that helps us understand just how important the Good News is; that God would go to such great lengths to prepare and share the Good News.

So before we get to our application points, which you will see in your notes, why don't I take a few moments to help us understand some of what was going on behind the scenes in this story that has given us another delivery of the Good News.

Zecharias was a priest and belonged to a section of priests called "Abijah" (awbee-yawh). Since the time of Moses, every direct descendent of Aaron was automatically a priest. By this time, it was over 1400 years after Aaron and Moses. So if you think about it, that means there were a lot of priests – way more than they needed. There were only two times each year that *every* priest served – two holidays: at Pentecost and at the Feast of Tabernacles. For the rest of the year, the priests were divided up into 24 sections, and each section served one week, twice a year, carrying out priestly duties in the Temple. For the priests who took their work seriously, to get selected to work that two weeks each year was the highlight of their lives; they looked forward to it all year long.

Also, a priest was only allowed to marry a woman of pure Jewish heritage – better even than that was if a priest would marry a purely Jewish woman who was also a descendent of Aaron. Elizabeth was just that. So Zechariah and Elizabeth were really good people.

Sometimes when we read the New Testament, we get the idea that all the religious people were really bad hypocrites like the Pharisees, but that's not true – not all of them were; mostly just the high ranking, powerful Jewish rulers, because they had a lot of power and money and prestige, and they didn't want to lose it, and Jesus was a threat to them. But for the most part, the religious Jewish people took their faith seriously and honestly. That's the kind of people Zechariah and Elizabeth were. They were the kind of people that God loves to bless.

Now, at the time of Zechariah there were around twenty thousand priests, so there was a little less than a thousand priests in each section. But there were only a handful of priestly duties to be carried out, so during each of the two different weeks of the year when a section was "on duty," they would choose out of a lottery which priests would actually get to serve; only a handful each week from the near thousand who were eligible.

One historian named William Barclay writes this: "Every morning and evening, a sacrifice was made for the whole nation. A burnt offering of a male, one year old, without spot or blemish was offered, together with a meat offering of flour and oil and a drink offering of wine. Before the morning sacrifice and after the evening sacrifice incense was burned on the altar of incense so that, as it were, the sacrifices might go up to God wrapped in an envelope of sweet-smelling incense. It was quite possible that many a priest would never have the privilege of burning incense all his life; but if the lot did fall on any priest that day was the greatest day in all his life, the day he longed for and dreamed of. On this day the lot fell on Zechariah and he would be thrilled to the core of his being."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Barclay, 10

But as excited as Zechariah was to be that chosen priest to burn the incense in the Holy of Holies, he still had a nagging grief that was always in his heart and mind. He and Elizabeth did not have a child, and now they were passed the age of being able to have children. No doubt they knew the emotional emptiness of never being able to be parents, never to raise a child to receive all their love and nurture and teaching. Many of you in this very room know that kind of pain; perhaps you've had miscarriages or are unable to have children. Or maybe tragic of all, you've outlived your children. You know that gaping emptiness that fills your heart, and you know how Zechariah and Elizabeth felt.

But more than that, there was professional and religious shame that went along with being childless. The Jewish rabbis said that there were seven people who would be excommunicated from God, and that list started with these two types of people: "A Jew without a wife, or worse yet, a Jew who has a wife but who does not have a child." Childlessness was actually grounds for divorce. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth felt this unfair societal shame, and yet here was Zechariah, a priest, serving the Lord, but the Lord wouldn't give him a child.

I remember when Shelly and I had been married for a couple of years; we decided it was time to start having children. But as time went on, we still couldn't conceive.

Finally we went to a doctor, and we got some fertility medicine. Still, it took four years for us to finally get pregnant with our first child. During those years we cried a lot, we prayed a lot, and we wondered why so many people could get pregnant – even some drug-addicted teen girls that we were working with – the last people who should be bringing children into the world – and yet here we were, serving God, and we couldn't get pregnant. I can't tell you the joy we felt when the day finally came when our son was born. We named him Sean, which is the Irish version of the Greek name John, as in "John the Baptist." John means, "God has been gracious." We felt that God had been very gracious to us; we realized we didn't deserve our son, and we were very grateful.

How much worse than us must Zechariah and Elizabeth felt! At least we didn't have the weight of all our religious history and society putting pressure on us.

But this must have always been on Zechariah's heart and mind so, on the one day of his life that he was able to be in the Holy of Holies of the Temple as a priest, and as he was making the sacrifice offering for the sins of the entire nation, of course he was thinking about his own hurt, his own needs, his hurting wife, and the shame they carried. After all, he was praying to God in the one place that God's presence was said to always be present. Even on this great day, Zechariah was thinking about his own domestic tragedy and was praying an inner dialogue with God about it. It was then that he got this amazing vision and message that a son would be born to him, even when hope was dead for him and Elizabeth, because the angel tells him, "Your prayers have been heard."

The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah. Gabriel is one of only two angels mentioned by name (Gabriel and Michael). Gabriel is mentioned four times in the Bible; twice in

the Old Testament to the godly Bible leader Daniel (Daniel 8:15–26, 9:21–27), and then two times here in Luke – to Zechariah and then to Mary (Luke 1:11-38).

When Zechariah heard this message, he questioned Gabriel. So deep was his hurt, and he had carried it for so many years, that even when the message was delivered by an angel in the Holy of Holies, Zechariah had trouble believing his eyes and ears. And we get the idea that Gabriel didn't take too kindly to Zechariah's debate, so he declared that Zechariah would not speak again until the baby, John, was born.

While this was taking place, a crowd was gathering in the next court of the Temple. It was part of the priestly privilege for the priest to finish offering the burnt incense and sacrifice, and then go out to bless the people. No doubt the crowd was filled with friends and family of Zechariah, who were excited for him to have finally been given this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. So they gathered along with other faithful Jews, waiting for Zechariah to come out. They began to wonder why he was delayed so long, and when he finally came out and could not speak the blessing to them, they knew he had seen a vision.

“So in a wordless daze of joy, Zechariah finished his week's duty and went home; and then the message of God came true and Elizabeth knew she was going to have a child. The angel Gabriel was right; this was very, very good news.

This good news that Gabriel spoke to Zechariah was about more than the conception of a child at such an old age; that would have been plenty of good news. But God made it clear that *their* good news was wrapped up in an even bigger, ultimate, Good News: that God was sending his Son, the Christ, into the world, and their son John was going to have a part in the Son of God's work in the world to save all people. Zechariah and Elizabeth's good news could not help but be a part of the bigger, *very* Good News; that God would be with us and save people from sin by giving his life in exchange for ours in cruciform love, and then rise from the dead ahead of us so that we could have abundant life here on earth and forever in heaven. The word that Gabriel used here is the same word that we talked about last week in Mark's Gospel – it is *euangelioun* (ewon-gel-ee-own) – the word we get evangelize from – but as a noun, not a verb. This Good News is a real state, or condition, or place of existence in relationship with God as our loving Father. So the message of good news spoken in this story is greater than fertility; Zechariah's good news would not even exist in the first place were it not for the very, very Good News of God's love for us through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of his Son.

So that means a few things to us today, because that Good News is available to every one of us. The first is that...

## 1. Good News Comes to Those Who *Need* It

The Good News of God's love comes to those who need it. Zechariah realized that he needed God to work in his life in ways that Zechariah never could himself. He knew that he needed God if he was ever going to receive Good News. Zechariah could not

deny that he was in a position that he could do nothing to change things; he needed God.

If you are going to be able to receive the Good News of God's love for you; if you are going to be able to allow God to work in your life, you are going to have to realize you need him. If you have never accepted what God has done for you through Christ and you are not in a relationship with him as your Father, then you are going to have to realize that you are never going to get out of your endless treadmill of a purposeless life without him. Without God, you are never going to have that deepest, empty loneliness filled. You can keep trying to fill it yourself if you want, but as long as you do that it won't work. Only God can do that. And the Bible says the kind of behavior and thinking of doing things yourself is called sin. Sin is the problem, and you can't fix it. You need God.

Or maybe you are in a relationship with God as your Father, but you still haven't seen an answer to some hurt or need that has been on your heart for a long time. Don't stop realizing you need God's Good News in your life and in that situation. Because...

## 2. Good News Comes to Those Who *Listen* for It

Zechariah remained faithful to God, despite the deep pain. Zechariah did not give up listening for God's voice and looking for God's hand to work in his situation. Even after all those years, he continued in his prayer to God about his need. He continued to listen.

Have you been faithful to God, but have not seen prayers answered the way you would hope? We know His delays are not always denials, but waiting is difficult when we see no evidence that God even hears our prayer or will ever answer it.<sup>3</sup>

Even though Zechariah's prayers for a son went years without being answered, he remained blameless before God. It was while he was faithfully carrying out his spiritual responsibilities...that God spoke to him and answered his prayer.<sup>4</sup> What a lesson for us—to be faithful to God and (keep serving him) regardless of circumstances or personal disappointments!<sup>5</sup>

What appeared to be a delay in answering their prayer made possible a birth that perfectly fit into God's timing for the coming Messiah. <sup>6</sup>

Don't stop listening for Good News from God; it will come in his time. And when it does, I tell you...

## 3. Good News *Leaves Us Speechless*

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<sup>3</sup> Ken Heer, *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

“We could imagine that Zechariah was ready to shout for joy when he learned God had answered his prayer, but when he asked Gabriel for some sign to verify that this was not a cruel hoax, the angel said:

“You will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words.” (Luke 1:20)

What a time to lose your voice! Even as a righteous man of faith, Zechariah had difficulty believing the message of the angel. Perhaps, like Thomas a few decades later (John 20), Zechariah’s doubt was born out of amazement that God could or would do such a thing. His lack of belief resulted in his inability to verbally communicate with others what God was planning.”<sup>7</sup>

Once you understand and experience the Good News of God’s love, it is very difficult to put it into words! In the Bible, an inability to speak often represents a lack of understanding. Granted, it often comes as the result of unbelief, but it can also come as the result of being overwhelmed. It happened to Daniel; it happened to Isaiah, it happened to John in his Revelation. The love of God in Christ for you is so incredible that, when you really begin to understand it, it will take your breath away and leave you speechless!

But don’t worry, because...

#### **4. Good News Comes to the *Voicless***

When you can’t put into words what you need from God, that is often when God is the closest to you. In those silent moments, God is very near, bringing Good News to you of his love for you.

And also, God is always ready and willing to speak up for those without a voice. When you feel that the world is against you, that you are powerless and you don’t have a voice, please realize that God has Good News for you; he gives a voice to those who have no voice, and he does it in ways that are amazing and miraculous. His deliverance always comes through his love for you! And when it comes, you will agree that...

#### **5. Good News Brings *Joy, Delight, and Impact***

When Gabriel delivered the Good News to Zechariah, he included this description of what will happen in their lives: “He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice...” God desires to bring joy and delight into your life. Does that mean that you will always be giddy and happy? No, of course not. Life can be hard, and God is sometimes very serious with us. But there are countless times in the Bible that God tells us he will bring us joy (even *great* joy!), increasing joy, and abounding joy. He wants us to be able to actually *enjoy* life. We can experience the presence of joy, and a delight in life, even during the difficult days and nights. This is Good News!

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid



And not only that, but as you allow the Good News of God's love into your life, it will be evident to others and they won't be able to help but give praise to God too – because it will be so clear that God is at work in your life. Your life and your example will have an impact on others and they will ask you what is going on in your life, and YOU will be able to deliver the Good News to your friends and family. According to Isaiah, *your* feet will be beautiful, as you share the Good News.

You need this Good News. It is very personal to your needs. Listen for it; expect it. Be prepared to be left speechless, and understand that God will give a voice to your deepest needs. God will fill your life with joy and delight, and your life will become a beacon of Good News to others.

*Pray*