

An Ordinary Priest: Zechariah

Luke 1:8-25

Everton Hills

27 November, 2016

Martin Luther loved Christmas. Every year it was a highlight. But for him, it wasn't the glitz and the glamour that made it special. It was the fact that in Christmas God became incarnate. In a sermon, preached in 1530, Luther noted, ***If Christ had arrived with trumpets and lain in a cradle of gold, his birth would have been a splendid affair. But it would not be a comfort to me. He was rather to lie in the lap of a poor maiden and be thought of little significance in the eyes of the world. Now I can come to him. Now he reveals himself to the miserable in order not to give any impression that he arrives with great power, splendor, wisdom, and aristocratic manners.***

As we prepare for Christmas this year, as we journey through the season of Advent, we will be looking at it through **the eyes of some ordinary people**... people who probably weren't significantly different from you and me, but people whom God used, to do some extraordinary things. And that's what I hope you realise over these weeks. God uses ordinary people, to do extraordinary things in his creation.

Prayer

Have you ever been told to be quiet?

It might surprise you, but I have. When I was growing up I had the reputation of just not shutting up. Like the proverbial joke about how do you frustrate a New South Welshman, **"you write PTO on both sides of a piece of paper"**, the way in which my family chose to frustrate me, was to tell me to be quiet.

Now since those days, I have come to understand the reason why I need to talk. I have difficulty processing stuff inside my head. Half the people in the world are like that. And the other half, the half that love to process stuff inside their heads, can't understand that.

You might be wondering why I am telling you that story today...

It is because that speaks into the situation that an ordinary priest, called Zechariah faced.

You will find the story at the beginning of the gospel according to Luke.

About Luke... Luke was a doctor and his interest is about life, real, ordinary, dirty, life. He begins his account of the good news of Jesus by telling the story of an ordinary couple called Elizabeth and Zechariah. We learn that Zechariah was a priest, and that Elizabeth was from the line of Aaron, which basically meant that if you weren't going to be a priest, you would probably be married to a priest.

We also learn that they are both very faithful. Very faithful. And very ordinary. Zechariah was not the head honcho of a big city mega-church. He wasn't highly regarded for writing books, or presenting

papers. He certainly was thought of as a key note speaker. There was nothing about him that made him stand out from the crowd... except that he was faithful.

“Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God’s eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord’s commandments and regulations.” (Luke 1:6, NLT)

What stood out about Zechariah and Elizabeth, was that they had a profound heart for the Lord in every circumstance.

And we know that because of what Luke says next...

“They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old.” (Luke 1:7, NLT)

Now, in our culture, that can be a big deal. But in Jewish culture, back then, people saw that as a sign of God turning his back on you. Rejecting you. Cutting off your line. And they would ask questions... “What have you done wrong?”

Notice how they respond. There is no evidence that they beat themselves up, saying ‘wo is me’. They don’t blame God. They don’t hold a grudge. They certainly pray about it. But then they simply do what they are meant to do – have a heart for the Lord in every circumstance and be faithful; even in things they found difficult, or didn’t understand.

I think there is a good lesson in there for us. I think we can learn that God’s call on our lives, despite what happens to us, despite what blessings we see, or don’t see on us, is a call to simply be trusting and be faithful – of remembering that God is God and we are not.

And that is what we learn as we pick up the story from verse 8...

“One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying.” (Luke 1:8–10, NLT)

Now to understand what is happening here, it was Zechariah’s group of priests turn to serve in the Temple. So what they would do is cast lots (maybe that’s a good way to choose a new Lead Pastor), to see who would enter the sanctuary for this special religious ceremony... And Zechariah’s number came up.

Think Old Testament. The picture here is that Zechariah drew the lot that led to get as close as practically possible to where it was thought that God ‘dwelt in the temple’.

So Zechariah went in. And Luke tells us that everyone else was outside, praying.

They noticed that Zechariah was in there for an unusually long time.

And Luke explains...

“While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. But the

angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John.” (Luke 1:11–13, NLT)

Gabrielle, the angel, tells Zechariah, that his son is going to be significant and important, and will **“...be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.”** (Luke 1:17, NLT)

That’s pretty cool, huh. And notice how Zechariah responds... ‘seriously? Yeah right!’ **“How can I be sure this will happen? I’m an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years.”** (Luke 1:18, NLT)

That’s not the first time that people have doubted God’s promise. Think of Abraham and Sarah... years passed before that promise was answered.

So Zechariah says ‘give me a sign’.

Can I say, that is always a dangerous thing to ask of God! Because the angel gave Zechariah a sign... you will be silent until the baby is born.

What to me would have been an amazing punishment, to Zechariah was an incredible gift. Not one that he wanted. But one that he needed.

The story of Zechariah reminds us, of how important it is to slow down and smell the cappuccino, to notice the sunset, to hear the voice of God. In this busy, fast paced season, full of glitter and glamour that takes our eyes away from the real meaning of the birth of Jesus, what would it be like if, over the coming weeks, you put aside 1 minute, 5 minutes, 10 minutes a day, to be silent and listen, and reflect on the person of Jesus Christ?

What would it be like if, over the coming weeks, you committed to 1 minute, 5 minutes, 10 minutes a day, to let God speak to you through his Word...

God’s word speaks to us, in ordinary situations – we simply need to slow down enough to hear him.

Worried about money? Worried about what to do or get at Christmas time? Jesus says... **“So don’t worry about these things, saying, ‘What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?’ These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. “So don’t worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”** (Matthew 6:31–34, NLT)

Anxious about things?

“Then Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and

you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.”
(Matthew 11:28–30, NLT)

Afraid?

Isaiah said

“Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. Don’t be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10, NLT)

When we meditate on God’s creative word, he creates hope and life in us.

So there are three things that I think we can learn from Zechariah.

Be faithful, even when you don’t understand.

Don’t say God can’t do things through you – because **God does extraordinary things, through ordinary people.**

Recognise **silence as a gift**; as a gift to slow down and hear God’s voice.

And to help you with that, in your handout today, is bible reading plan, to help.