

## Zechariah's Shock - Luke 1: 5-25

Sermon 27-11-22 (PK)

### Setting the scene

When will God intervene? We might think of war in Ukraine, or the darkening clouds of changing climate, famine and flood; and ask when will God intervene? Or perhaps an injustice closer to home. When will God intervene?

This is the question that stands open at the end of last prophecy the Old Testament, the accounts of God's dealings with his people up to Jesus' time. How is it that those who do evil prosper and those who do right suffer? When will the LORD intervene to put things right?

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We stand here today on the threshold of the new year. The new *church* year. The church year which runs from Advent – which starts today – to Christmas to Epiphany to Lent to Easter to Ascension and Pentecost. And fittingly we stand also on threshold of Luke's account of these great events of the life of Jesus, this account of the coming of the rightful heir to all creation. What I have to say to you today is that this is God's intervention. That Jesus is God's intervention.

It's not the intervention that we expect. Nor necessarily the easy answer we might choose. Could not the LORD God deal with Putin and his oligarchs? Or those who promote oil and gas for profit? Or for that matter, the tyrant, King Herod or the cruel Roman Emperor. Well, yes, but the intervention God chooses is different. It is not first and foremost to relieve these symptoms. But rather to put in place a wholly different order. It is to deal with the root cause: the rebellion of humankind against God's ways. For it is from our rebellion that all injustice, cruelty and destruction flows.

This is God's intervention: rightful heir, Jesus the Christ, God himself incarnate, comes making peace. First making peace with us – and this he achieves in the great events of Easter in crucifixion for our sins and resurrection – and second in calling us to be agents of his peace; making peace with one another and all that he has made. The LORD God's intervention is a cosmic scale transformative event. An event that makes possible peace with God. An event which restores us to our true humanity; to our true identity and our true purpose. An event which begins to make all things new. And he calls us – restored and renewed – into his mission of making peace.

The events recorded in chapters 1-2 of Luke's account are fanfares of this intervention: this announcement to Zechariah, and to come: Zechariah's prophecy over his son; Gabriel's announcement to Mary of Jesus' birth; the angels' announcement to the shepherds; Simeon's and Anna's prophecy over Jesus. These are all fanfares of the true heir come to rule. And this passage we have today, here at the very beginning of Luke's account, is the first of these fanfares.

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So, let's turn to our passage. In this first announcement, this fanfare of the fanfares, what does God choose to have Gabriel say to Zechariah?

### **A setting, a sign and a message**

God at this crucial moment in history gathers up the full weight of his dealings with his people over centuries, even millennia, in this announcement by Gabriel to Zechariah. He does it by way of setting, a sign and a message.

First, the setting.

Luke is careful to draw our attention to the setting. We can see this in verses 8 to 10, and 21 to 23. Zechariah is servicing (it's his turn as one from the line of priests, selected by lot, to offer incense, a great privilege); in the temple sanctuary; the people of God assembled outside. The announcement takes place in the sanctuary of the Temple. This is the centre of Israel's worship for hundreds of years, the place where heaven and earth overlap. There is no place with greater significance for God's people. In sending Gabriel to make this announcement here, in the Temple, God is emphasising both the significance of the message and its fulfilment of the long history of temple worship. This is no random event, but full of significance.

Second, a sign.

Luke draws our attention to the parallels between the promise to Zechariah and Elizabeth of a longed-for child in their later years and the same promise to Abram and Sarah, back right at the beginning of God's dealings with his people in Genesis. Just as Abram and Sarah are in old age to have a child, so Zechariah and Elizabeth in old age are also to have a child. Just as Abram and Sarah's child was the first in the long line which would ultimately bring blessing to the nations, now John, born to Zechariah and Elizabeth, is to announce the coming of the Anointed One, Jesus. God intends us to gather up this promise to Abram long ago and see it about to be fulfilled in Jesus.

We might also in this promise of a child, hear echoes of the birth of a longed-for child to Hannah and Elkanah. Just as Samuel, born to Hannah, was dedicated to the service of the Lord, so John born to Zechariah and Elizabeth is to be dedicated to the service of the Lord. Just as Samuel – priest in the temple of God – all those years ago anoints David king of Israel, inaugurating the whole Davidic line of kings, so John, born into his parents' priestly line, is to anoint Jesus the rightful king of Israel and all the world. God here intends us to gather up the promise of an anointed king, a true heir.

Third, the message.

The angel's announcement places John, to be born to Zechariah and Elizabeth, squarely as the one promised by the prophets who would make ready a people prepared for God. This strange phrase 'with the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts

of fathers to their children' is taken directly from the very last line of Malachi's prophecy, the very last prophecy of the Old Testament. Listen to the words of Malachi: 'I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers'. Coincidence? No, I think not.

But it *is* an unusual phrase: 'turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers'. We might be tempted to hear this as rather a nice saying about parents getting on better with children. That might not be a bad thing. But it would indeed be an odd announcement for Luke to open an account of the rightful heir becoming king with.

Malachi though uses the picture of God as a father to Israel his children. A father with rebellious children. A son honours his father, the LORD, God, says, where then is the honour due to me? Israel has despised, wearied and robbed God. This could be a summary of the history of Israel with God throughout its Old Testament history. But God who all through the Old Testament seeks to restore, redeem and reconcile rebellious humanity, ends this final prophecy with the promise that one will come who will turn the hearts of the children to their fathers and fathers to their children. This is a promise of reconciliation between God and humankind. This is not a statement about relationship between parents and children but between God and his people. The one promised by God in Malachi's prophecy will turn the people's hearts to the LORD and the LORD's heart to his people.

In sending Gabriel with this message God intends we gather up the promise – made by all the prophets – of reconciliation between God and humankind. Of God somehow, despite our rebellion, intervening to make peace with us.

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Now, as we stand here at the threshold of the year, at the threshold of Luke's account, as we hear this first fanfare of God's intervention, this gathering up of the promises of God, this message of coming reconciliation, it's possible to overlook that everything that's pointed to here has now all happened. God's intervention has happened. Jesus in fact reigns now. The Spirit has been given.

Luke's account goes on to emphasise that God's intervention calls us to participate in his mission. God – in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ – achieves the reconciliation between us and him; he restores us to our God-given identity and purpose; he restores us to our true humanity. This is something we can only receive as a gift from God. Yet he also calls us to live out this mission of making peace between ourselves, making peace one with another, making peace with all creation. God's plan for change is the Spirit working through his church, living now, in accordance with his way of peace.

So, we might consider how today we are making peace. How are we making peace in our homes? How are we making peace in our workplaces? We might consider how we may live in such a way as to be at peace with all God's creation. How we may live in such a way as to be at peace with our distant neighbour.

Or we might consider what response the self-giving way of Jesus might call out from his people to some of those events which seem to demand an intervention. What response might Jesus have been seeking from his people in Ukraine and further afield today? His people in Russia? Or in response to the floods in Pakistan and the drought and famine in East Africa? Or in the years to come, the inevitably rising number seeking refuge on our shores from catastrophe? Or to the dark threat of changing climate and failing climate talks? What does Jesus – the self-giving peace-making way of Jesus – the One who makes peace between us and God – the One who calls us into his mission of peace-making – what response does this Jesus call out in his people?

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So, Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah gathers up the thick strands of God's dealings with his people from the promise given to Abram and Sarah in Genesis to the last word of the prophets to Israel. He picks up the promise that all nations will be blessed through the line that runs from Abram and Sarah. He picks up the promise of a rightful heir in the line of Davidic kings. He picks up the presence of God with his people in the temple of God. And he picks up the promise of the prophets that one would come to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah gathers up the strands of God's dealings with his people from first promise to last promise. He gathers them into this first fanfare of God's great intervention; God's intervention in Jesus Christ to make peace; this intervention which calls us into his mission of making peace. We who live now beyond this intervention: what does Jesus – the self-giving, peace-making way of Jesus – the One who makes peace between us and God – the One who calls us into his mission of peace-making – what response does this Jesus call out in us today, this week?