

God's certain promise keeper

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[0 : 00] Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah, and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now, while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

[1 : 18] And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

And Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years. And the angel answered him, I am Gabriel.

I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.

[2 : 45] And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple.

And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days, his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.

Well, good morning everyone. Welcome to Grace Church. I'll add my welcome to John's and Sir Simon's. I am Ben. I'm one of the church wardens here. I'm shorter than the other two, which explains what I'm doing now.

And with Simon having lost his voice, I do hope you don't mind his words coming out of my mouth. We're going to pray, however, that it is God's words we hear this morning.

So let's just bow our heads and pray for a moment. Words from 2 Timothy chapter 3. All scripture is breathed out by God. And so, Heavenly Father, we pray as we come to the Bible this morning, as we hear you speak, we pray that we have our certainty in you and our certainty in your promises strengthened.

[4 : 12] Amen. Well, there are loads of things that I love about living in London. But there are also plenty of things that I really enjoy escaping London for.

And in particular, it's that change of perspective, isn't it? You know, you can see just about to the other side of the street, can't you? But when you leave London, you see the hills, the horizon. You get that wonderful, deep sense of fresh air, rejoicing in a different perspective. Now, if you know what on earth I'm talking about, you'll get a sense that that's a tiny picture of what the message of Jesus Christ gives on the whole of our life.

Because you and I arrive at church on a Sunday morning, dizzy with the amount of stuff that's going on in our lives, in the news, events that the overheated flurry of the web and the media present on the world.

Whether it's Brexit or Trump, or the death of David Bowie or Leonard Cohen, or perhaps the dizziness of our own diaries. We rush, don't we, from wrong thing to the next at work and at school and at home.

[5 : 24] Or maybe the dizziness of social media as we desperately try to keep up with everybody else. And while, yes, we can get some change of perspective by going away for a few days or catching up with friends or having a total detox from social media, actually the real perspective we all need comes from being certain about Jesus Christ.

And that is exactly the perspective that Luke's Gospel, that we have in front of us today, provides. Remember, last week, those of you who were here, as we started this series of talks in Luke, that's why he writes what he does in chapter 1, verse 4.

Have a quick look down. Chapter, Luke, which is on page 103.0. Chapter 1, verse 4. Why did he write this? That you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

And do listen to that talk online if you have a chance when you get home. And it's just that perspective that those young people this morning who were baptised or had those vows reconfirmed.

Philippa, Hannah, Lydia, Johnny, Millie, Freddie. It's exactly what they needed, that change of perspective. And it's what all of us need if we call ourselves Christians here today.

[6 : 42] Or perhaps those of us who are just looking in on the Christian faith. And we'll see in our Bible passage this morning that such a perspective comes from the certainty in the God who both speaks and acts.

And you'll find an outline of this morning's talk on the back of the service sheet in front of you. So do please refer to that as well as the passage. So firstly, certainty in the God who speaks.

It's verse 5. In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron.

And her name was Elizabeth. Now whether it's a posh coffee shop or the pub or the boardroom or the factory floor, the persistent view of so many is that the New Testament is a book merely of myths.

So notice, will you as you look down, that just as a news report provides a location and date, Luke is equally careful to locate events in their historical context.

[7 : 50] King Herod, we know, ruled from 37 BC to 4 BC. He was appointed by a decree of Mark Antony in the Roman Senate to rule over the provinces of Judea and Galilee.

It's a time of national suffering. God's people being governed by a despot who is a pawn of the Roman Empire. And it's a time of personal suffering as well.

Because we're immediately confronted by sadness and tragedy. Have a look down at verse 6 and 7. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes to the Lord.

But they had no child because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years. Zachariah and Elizabeth had no children, no hope of children.

And in that culture, as in so many cultures, that was an utter disgrace. And yet in verse 6, they remain righteous and blameless in their affliction. Not perfect, but faithful.

[8 : 59] In other words, they don't have a slot machine picture of God. That's the picture that says, if I do my bit for him, he'll do his bit for me.

A God that must give me the life that I think I deserve. The life that I have a right to have. It's always a tragedy that when in the midst of suffering and hardship, people turn their backs on God.

And it's so often because people have this slot machine view of God. I've put my coin in the slot, but God isn't delivering his side of the deal. And it raises the question, is there any hope in suffering? Maybe that's your question this morning. Ah, secular culture says that the only way to find hope is within yourself. You need to believe in yourself.

Have confidence in yourself. Or take up mindfulness. See if that helps. Or what about adult colouring books? Do you remember that craze last year? One of the major city law firms was giving them to staff and even clients to help them de-stress.

[10:10] Or to put it another way, was Steve Jobs right? The co-founder of Apple wasn't just able to design great products. He also had an acute understanding of the spirit of the age.

And it was that that enabled him to create a brand that appeals to our deep longings. The names, of course, of his Apple products are striking. The iPod, the iPad, the iMac.

He knew that we live in the i world. A world in which everything revolves around the individual. But it doesn't.

Because although God doesn't speak in verses 5 to 10. And indeed, you may have even thought the title of this section, Certainty in the God Who Speaks, is a rather strange one.

But nonetheless, God has spoken in the past. In the Old Testament, we see God as a God who speaks. His people are to write down and publicly read his word.

[11:15] Because God relates to his people through words. And we see that the words he spoke to his people in the past are the very same as the words he speaks to his people today.

Which is why Zachariah and Elizabeth have based their lives on God's word. Verse 6, have a look down. Walking blamelessly in all, what?

The commands and statutes of the Lord. And although it's 450 years since God last spoke. 450 years since the book of Malachi. The last book of the Old Testament.

It doesn't mean that God has forgotten or changed his plans. Which is why God's word is the foundation of their lives. And what's more, God is about to speak again.

Verses 8 to 10. Now while he was serving as a priest before God. When his division was on duty. According to the custom of the priesthood. He was chosen by lot.

[12:16] To enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. Now the place is significant.

The temple in Jerusalem where God symbolically dwelt with his people. Which links this one event in the history of God's dealings with his people over hundreds of years beforehand.

Because early morning and early evening there was a sacrifice. After which one of the priests would have the privilege of taking incense into the holy place.

And praying on behalf of the nation. Praying in the very place that symbolized the presence of God. For God to fulfill his promises.

To do what he'd said in the past he would do. And send his Messiah to rescue. Send his Messiah to redeem his people.

[13:17] Certainty in the God who speaks. That's the first way in which this passage gives us perspective. We don't live in an I world. In which everything revolves around me.

In which reality is simply measured in terms of what I can see and touch and feel. We live in God's world. And God is a speaking God.

Without that certainty. Then something else. Or someone else. Will always be setting the agenda. For our lives. Whatever or whoever it is that shouts the loudest.

And it's why when we meet here on a Sunday morning. It is the reading. And it's the explaining of God's word. That is central. And it's why the youth and children's work at the church here.

It is God's word that is explained and read. That it remains the focus. So firstly. Certainty in a God who speaks.

[14:15] Secondly. Certainty in the God who acts. Look down at verse 11. And there appeared to him. An angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

Again. Notice the eyewitness detail. Zachariah was standing on the right hand side of the altar. And presumably the only reason Luke knew that. Was because he had access to Zachariah's eyewitness account.

And then verse 12. Something highly unusual. And Zachariah was troubled. It says in verse 12. When he saw him. And fell.

And fear fell upon him. It's easy to imagine. That angels are a common occurrence in the Bible. Especially and particularly as we approach the Christmas time. If we think of those Christmas nativity plays. In our experience. Most nativity plays have angels sort of popping in. Every few minutes. All over the place. Zachariah on the other hand. [15:21] Lives in the real world. He's fearful. When he sees an angel. Just like we would. And the angel says in verse 13. Have a look.

Don't be afraid Zachariah. For your prayer has been heard. And your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. And you shall call his name John. Now just ask the question. What do you think Zachariah and Elizabeth were praying for? It's possible of course that they were simply praying for a child. And the birth of John the Baptist would be a wonderful answer to their prayer.

But I think it's likely that they are praying for more than that. For God perhaps to keep his Old Testament promises. To send the Messiah. Who would rescue his people. After all that's the prayer. That would have been used as the incense was offered in the temple. Which explains why in verse 14. Not only will Zachariah and Elizabeth have joy and gladness at his birth.

[16:21] After all what new parents don't have that. But many others will rejoice at his birth too. Verse 15. For he will be great before the Lord.

And he must not drink wine or strong drink. And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. Even from his mother's womb. The point here is that this is no flash in the pan event. This is not some random story of God speaking to one man. That doesn't connect with anything previously. Rather here is the fulfillment of God's plan. God's purpose. Because what God is about to do. Is consistent with what he's done in the past. And you may have heard things ringing in this passage.

God is choosing a childless couple. Just as if you remember. Abraham and Sarah. The parents of Isaac. Had been childless. Isaac of course who became one of the great patriarchs of the Old Testament.

[17:21] Just as Hannah and Elkanah. The parents of Samuel had been childless. Samuel who prepared God's Old Testament people Israel. For the coming of the great king David. Just as Samson's parents were childless.

Samson the great deliverer of God's people. And by declaring him a Nazarite. That's the stuff about not drinking wine. And filling him with the Holy Spirit.

Well he's making the point that God is acting and intervening in his world once again. Just in the same way that he's done in the past. The birth of John the Baptist is the fulfillment of God's plan and his promises.

After 450 years the waiting is finally over. Now just think back to the Olympics in the summer. Those years of training. The unseen preparation.

All leading up to one event. And then at Rio the waiting is over. Or perhaps for some of us here the waiting was finally over on Friday evening. As the grand tour was released on Amazon Prime.

[18:31] After months of tantalizing clips and teasers on social media. Clarkson Hammond and May were once again entertaining millions. Similarly.

The announcement of the birth of John the Baptist. Is the point at which God is saying. The waiting is over. But waiting for what exactly?

To do what exactly? Look down at verse 16 and verse 17. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

And he will go before them in spirit and power of Elijah. To turn the hearts of the fathers to the children. And the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. To make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

Do you remember last week? We said that Luke is not simply writing a history. He is writing fulfillment. But the Old Testament is the key to unlocking the significance of who Jesus Christ is.

[19:32] And why he came. Do you remember that? And so whenever Luke gives us a quote from the Old Testament. We need to go back. To understand what was the original promise.

That is now going to be fulfilled. So turn back with me if you will. To Malachi chapter 3. That is the very last book of the Bible. It is on page 970.

The last book of the Old Testament I should say. Malachi chapter 3 verse 1. What does God promise?

Behold. It says. Behold. I send my messenger. And he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

And the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. Behold. He is coming. Says the Lord of hosts. So two people will come. First the messenger.

[20 : 34] And then the Lord himself. Which explains. Doesn't it? How the book ends. In chapter 4 verse 5 and 6. So flick on over the page of Malachi. Chapter 4 verse 5 and 6.

Behold. I will send you Elijah the prophet. Before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children. And the hearts of children to their fathers. Lest I come and strike the land with a decree. Of utter destruction. An Elijah figure. Will come. Who? Like Elijah. And in view of the judgment to come.

Will call God's people to repentance. Just as the angel promises to Zechariah in Luke chapter 1 verse 16. He will turn many to the Lord their God.

John the Baptist will turn people back to God. And it's a reminder of our greatest need. You see what would you expect God to say after a wait of 450 years?

[21 : 34] How's the cricket? What's the weather been like? As if God hasn't really got much to say at all. Or perhaps how's Brexit going? Tell me about the NHS. As if the nation's political life is the most important thing.

No. Far more important is whether you and I have turned back to God. It's why today is a day to celebrate. As six people publicly mark their turning to God.

Not by coming to believe in John the Baptist. No. He's just the messenger. But by believing in Jesus Christ. The one for whom John prepared the way. Who died on the cross.

So we can be forgiven. And made right with God. And it's a challenge. To any who have yet to do that. It's a challenge to say to God.

I'm not a good person. I've lived my life with myself at the centre. I've kept you at a distance. I know the judgement is coming. Just as the prophet Malachi said it would.

[22 : 35] And now I turn in repentance and faith. To receive the promise of forgiveness. And to follow Jesus Christ. Certainty in the God who acts.

That's the second way this passage gives us perspective. Because just as through the prophet Malachi. God had promised that he'd come into the world the first time. So the Lord Jesus promised that there would be a second coming.

And it's what Advent is all about. As we look forward to the return of Jesus Christ at the end of history. But hasn't he taken too long in coming? After 2,000 years.

Will God really do what he said he's going to do? Can we be certain that following Jesus Christ is really worth it? Well yes. Because God not only speaks.

But he acts on his promises. Look down at verse 18. And Zechariah said to the angel.

[23 : 36] How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years. Do you notice it's an almost identical response to Abraham's unbelief in the Old Testament.

On being told that he and his wife Sarah would give birth to a son in their old age. You see there's a world of difference. Between saying I don't think you can do this.

And please explain how you will do this. And interestingly. It is that second question. That Mary asks. Later on.

Look down at verse 34. And Mary said to the angel. How will this be? Since I'm a virgin. And then of course in verse 35 there's the explanation.

Whereas in verse 20. With Zechariah. The angel knows. Knows that Zechariah's question. Stems from an unbelief. Yes for Zechariah and Elizabeth to have a child.

[24 : 36] Would mean a complete reversal of the natural processes of aging and decay. Would take a miracle indeed. But if God can't do that. How will he ever pull off a virgin birth?

Or raise the dead body of Jesus Christ? Which is why Zechariah is then struck dumb. Because for him to disbelieve the angel on the grounds.

That miraculous divine intervention was impossible. Well it made a nonsense of the very faith which is a priest. He was appointed to represent and maintain. Sadly.

Of course that is all too common. In many churches today. And so every day. Until John the Baptist is born. He'll remember. That he didn't trust.

The words of God. He didn't trust. God to act. As he said he would. And God takes unbelief very seriously.

[25 : 33] Which is why as Luke puts the two responses of Zechariah and Mary next to each other. Well there's a challenge for each of us. Don't assume that because we come to church every week.

And then. And even that others may consider us a pillar of Grace Church Dulwich. That we're responding rightly in our heart. Zechariah wasn't. One of the surprises of Luke's gospel.

Is that those who might be expected to welcome and believe in Jesus. They reject him. While those who appear to be far away from God. Receive him.

So this morning. Which are we? Are we like Zechariah? Unbelieving? Doubting? Or like Mary? Believing? Trusting? Trusting? Trusting? Promise? kills? Leave us change. Appreciate that. Have we?

[26 : 34] Ellehâ snap. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Hi.

Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye.