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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. My name is James. Is anyone feeling prepared for Christmas? I hear some concerned noises. Well, what do you have to do to get ready? Do you still have to buy presents, prepare the food, put the decorations up, maybe buy a Christmas tree?

We moved house a week ago, and yesterday we bought our first real Christmas tree. And I tell you what, it smells amazing. We set up the decorations, and Isaac kept putting them on and then taking them off, and he just didn't get the idea of it. But, you know, I feel like to really be prepared for Christmas, I still need a Christmas ham. I still need to get a ham. I see at least one person nodding.

That is really good. What is it for you that makes you feel like you could say, yes, I'm prepared for Christmas? What about the Christ side of Christmas?

Is there anything you do to prepare yourself to celebrate God sending his eternal son? Or does this just get lost in the busyness of the season? Over the next two weeks, we're going to consider what God did to prepare for that very first Christmas. Because it was a very well-prepared event, very long in coming. And we're going to consider what we should be doing to prepare for Christmas next week, in just 11 days. I hope that doesn't scare you too much.

It does, good. Please open your Bibles, or keep them open with me, to Luke chapter 1. In Luke's account of the gospel, he doesn't start off his narrative with Jesus, the main character.

[1 : 52] He starts off with two fairly ordinary people, Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah and Elizabeth were both descendants of Aaron. He was the priest who helped Moses. But there's a problem.

Have a look with me at verse 6. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well along in years. You know, immediately this makes me think of other notable characters in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, who were barren. Abraham and Sarah, who eventually had Isaac.

You know, Hannah, she really wanted a child, and she promised God that if she had a son, she would give him to the Lord. And that's Samuel. And we can think, something great is going to happen.

You know, we've got this problem. What's God going to do to fix it? But at this point, we should note that Elizabeth, a little later on, describes it, she describes her barrenness as a disgrace among the people.

Deuteronomy 28 says that one of the repercussions of not following the Lord's commands is that the fruit of your womb would be cursed. And you can imagine that when people saw old Elizabeth, you know, slowly wandering down the street to the market, you know, they would have given her a sideways look, saying, you know, what has she done to earn such disgrace from God?

[3 : 33] Even now, although children are not as common in marriage, you know, people still ask the question, you know, you guys have been married for a couple of years, when are you going to have kids? And if people are struggling with infertility, it is very difficult to talk about.

Elizabeth and Zechariah's pain and shame at this point is very real. And since she's old, there is no end in sight for her.

So what is God going to do into this situation? The author Luke then tells us about a time when Zechariah was doing his priestly service in the temple.

This is the temple in Jerusalem. And it was his group of priests turn to go and serve at the temple. And someone would be chosen to go and burn incense.

And Zechariah just happens to get chosen by random. And this would have been a very special honor for Zechariah. You know, some priests would just never get the chance to do this.

[4 : 37] And he's going to the most holy place. The most holy place to offer incense to where God was said to dwell. You know, you can imagine this old priest as he's walking through, trying to remember every image of the temple.

He's read the description in the Bible, but he's just trying to remember every part. It would be like the biggest cricket fan in the world. Not me, but, you know, I'd love to do this.

You know, going to the home of cricket, Lords, and being able to walk out onto the turf and touch the grass and be like, ah, so many cricket players have played here, this is amazing. Or, you know, a massive guitar fan or a music fan being able to hold one of Jimi Hendrix's guitars and maybe even being able to play it.

It's just very special. You know, for cricket and, you know, guitar, this is almost religious. For Zechariah, it was very religious. But it's a very special event.

He's been a priest all his life. And now he gets to go to the most important place for Judaism. The place where sin was atoned for before God. And what happens in the temple is almost comedic.

[5 : 51] It's designed to make you laugh. Have a look. He walks in. He's there to offer incense. And then, bam, out of nowhere, there's an angel standing right there.

Just, it'd be like me walking up here and then just an angel appearing right here. And he's startled. He probably nearly drops the incense he's come to offer. And the angel speaks to him.

Have a look at verse 13. Let's see what he says. Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son.

And you are to give him the name John. Then down in verse 17. And he will go on before 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. The angel promises a son who will be like the prophet Elijah.

[6 : 53] Who will prepare people for the Lord. This is really significant for at least three reasons. First of all, an old man and an old woman are going to have a child.

This is miraculous. God is working miracles again. Secondly, there's going to be another prophet in Israel. This is after 400 years of silence.

So not only is God working miracles again. He is speaking again. And he has promised that the Lord will come. So God is working miracles.

He is speaking and he is coming. This is amazing. And how does Zechariah respond? Verse 18. How can I be sure of this?

I am an old man. And my wife, she is well along in years. I think that's a polite way of saying she's also old. But take note husbands.

[7 : 50] You know, that's a good way to say it. Zechariah doesn't believe the good news from the angel. It's important to note at this point, Zechariah is functioning as Israel's representative in the temple.

He is the priest in the very heart of the temple before God. And he doesn't trust the message from God. This is an early indication of the way the Pharisees and Sadducees would respond to Jesus in the future.

You know, not believing what he says, but saying, where is your sign? And I love how the angel responds here. You can imagine his face changing. So, you know, so his face looks like a storm.

Have a look in verse 19. Zechariah comes out of the temple.

He can't speak. He's got a sign to the people waiting. And as the angel promised, Zechariah and Elizabeth conceive a child.

[9 : 10] But there's a really interesting comment from Elizabeth here. In verse 25. The Lord has done this for me, she said. In these days, he has shown his favor and he has taken away my disgrace among the people.

The Lord has done this for me. Isn't that a bit short-sighted and a bit of a selfish view for Elizabeth to be saying this? You know, God is working out his plan for salvation for mankind.

Propheesied about in the Old Testament that John would be the forerunner for Jesus. And this woman thinks it's all about her? Well, these two things are not separate.

God is bringing joy to Elizabeth. But he's also bringing about his plan for salvation. Because God uses ordinary people. Ordinary people like all of us here.

And he uses our hopes and desires for his own purposes. Our passions, our hopes and our desires are not necessarily separate from God's.

[10 : 18] He is a loving father. And he can use them to bring joy through our patience and faith in him. We are real people in a real world.

With real desires, hopes and passions. And God does not call us to cut off from those good desires. Even if we should flee the sin of the world.

Alyssa and I have just moved out of more college accommodation. We had the benefit of living in a great community for four years. In a one-bedroom and then a two-bedroom apartment.

And it was really good to be in community. But in that little two-bedroom apartment with two kids, it sometimes got a bit small.

And Isaac, he likes to run and jump and jump off things. And just a week ago, we moved into a house in Beverly Hills. Just near where we'll be working next year. And this is something we've been looking forward to for a while.

[11 : 18] Setting up a little house for ourselves. With a backyard for Isaac. With a room for Tamara. Just so that, you know, we've just been looking forward to this.

This has been one of our desires recently. We moved last week. And on the second day we were there, we got an invitation in our letterbox. For a cul-de-sac Christmas party a couple of days later.

And we thought, this is fantastic. We can, you know, we've just moved in. And we're going to get to meet all of our neighbors. And we got to meet them all. And there's some unique characters there. There's some Christians that just live across the road from us.

Which is really lovely. But what I'm really interested in is. How is God going to use our desire to have a house in the suburbs. With good neighbors.

How is God going to use that desire to reach these people? They all know that next year I'll be an Anglican minister. Probably going to see them every day after church.

[12 : 18] You know, today I'll see them when I get home. It's Sunday. They'll probably say, what have you done today? And I'll say, well, I was at church. Let's talk about Jesus. But what opportunities is God setting up for me with my neighbors?

What desires and passions do you have that God could use? If only you would see them and be open to them. If you talk to a young man in our congregation, Ian Francis.

If you talk to him for longer than a couple of minutes. He might mention how good the surf was this morning. Was it good this morning? Scary. Scary. But scary, good.

Okay. I'm not sure what that means. And Ian regularly tells me about how he went for a surf. And how he just invited someone to come to church.

And how he may have even read the Bible with someone this morning. Did that happen this morning, Ian? He's trying to remember. Maybe not this morning. That's okay. I love how Ian's passion for surfing and for God are not two separate things.

[13 : 27] Zachariah was full of doubt and didn't trust God. Elizabeth had been waiting for many years for her child.

But God was going to use them and their passion and their desires to announce the coming of the Lord. Even though they were ordinary people.

As part of being prepared for Christmas. Be prepared for God to use you in extraordinary ways. Even though we are ordinary people.

How can your passions and desires be used? Is it simply the case of sharing a passion with someone or sharing something you like?

Like say golf. I don't particularly like golf. But if you were to play golf with a friend. You've got them with you for a good couple of hours. Walking around a golf course.

[14 : 22] What a great opportunity you could have to talk to them. Jumping down to verse 57. We also jump to the end of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

And her baby's birth. She wants to call him John against the custom of the time. But the people with her are confused. So Zachariah clarifies. Have a look at verse 62.

Then they made signs to his father to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet. And to everyone's astonishment he wrote.

His name is John. Immediately his mouth was opened. And his tongue was loosed. And he began to speak praising God. When the baby is named John.

It not only brings an end to Zachariah's silence. But also it brings an end to God's silence to Israel. Zachariah's silence. It's a metaphor for the 400 years of silence that God had with Israel.

[15 : 27] With the birth of John. God is going to speak again to the people. This doesn't seem that amazing for us. Because we as Christians.

We're people of the book. You know we can always refer to God's word. But Israel had to have prophets to speak to them. They didn't rely on the written words like we can.

For us if we have questions about something in life. We talk to God. We pray. We read his word. For an Israelite. They could pray. But they were dependent on a prophet.

To hear from God. So this really is. An amazing occasion for Israel. And the whole world. God is going to be speaking again.

And the message that the prophet like baby would bring. Is indicated by a song that Zachariah sings. You know he's probably been busting to make a noise for nine months.

[16 : 26] And he's had time to think about his own doubts. And God's word from the angel. From the messenger. And he sings praising God. In verse 76.

Have a look with me. And you my child. Will be called a prophet of the most high. For you will go on before the Lord. To prepare the way for him.

To give his people the knowledge of salvation. Through the forgiveness of sins. This is the message that John brings. To repent and have forgiveness.

And this is the same message that Jesus brings. God is speaking again. And what does he say? Your exile. Your control from other enemies is over.

The real enemy. Separation from God by death. Is going to be dealt with. There will be forgiveness of sins. This is still the same message that God speaks to us today.

[17 : 31] Zachariah prophesied about God's mercy. And the coming forgiveness. And the coming forgiveness of sins. And we see this in how tenderly God treats us today. He lowers himself to our level as a man.

He paid the ultimate price. And he deals with our sinfulness, doubt and faithlessness. God reveals his preparations and the inner workings.

Of this big event. The coming of the Lord. He shows us all the pieces. For the most spectacular Christmas in history. So what does it mean then for us to be prepared for Christmas?

The first question we need to consider. Is how we will respond to the message. Of salvation. And freedom from sin. That John and Jesus bring.

Will we respond like Zachariah first did. With fear and doubt. Or maybe we'll just respond with nonchalance. And say you know I've heard it all before. I'm not that interested this year.

[18 : 40] Can I ask you to consider this week before Christmas. How have you responded to this message? You may have been sitting in roughly the same spot in this church for 5, 10, 20, 30 years.

And thought look everything is fine between me and God. But maybe you've not heard the message and actually responded. You may have thought look I'm part of the club.

But when it comes down to brass tacks. And life gets difficult and stressful. You don't trust like Zachariah. Zachariah needed those nine months to consider God's work and his words.

Before the Lord's first coming. This time of year is a good opportunity to consider the words of Jesus. The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

You might be feeling like you are mostly prepared for Christmas next week. With all the food, most of the presents organized. But are you prepared for the second coming of Jesus?

[19 : 49] Have you put as much time and thought into being prepared for the second coming of Jesus as you have for a lunch next Thursday? Maybe a dinner. Is next week...

Are you putting a lot of time into that? Are you putting a lot of time compared to the amount of time considering the Lord's second coming? It is more important to be prepared for that day that Jesus returns than for next Thursday.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for how you have showed us the inner workings and preparations for your plan of salvation.

Help us to not ignore them or the forgiveness that you have brought us through your Son. Help us to consider anew this week your Son's birth and how we respond to him.

Help us to be prepared to love those around us and take every opportunity you give us,
Lord. In Jesus' name we pray.

[21 : 00] Amen.