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The Creep that Stole Christmas

Luke 1:5-25

Good morning Chapel Hill. The season of Advent is upon us. So, in the coming weeks we'll be looking again at the texts of Matthew and Luke that point us to the truths of that first Christmas. I hope, though, that you don't yawn and think 'been there, done that'. I hope you don't just listen to these texts and think, "oh, how cute." Rather, I hope you hear these texts afresh – that you'll open yourself up to the wonder, and the hope, and the power of God in this His salvation narrative.

Luke 1:5-25

It was fun to see that video of Mark from Israel. One of the real privileges of my ministry at Chapel Hill has been to lead a tour of Israel with Mark. Actually being in the places you read about in the Bible is an amazing experience. The setting for our scripture today was the temple in Jerusalem – but before the temple was built, Israel used a tent, called the tabernacle, as its worship center. One of the things we did on our Holy Land trip was to walk through a replica of the Old Testament tabernacle that some guy had built out in the desert. Mark and I split the Chapel Hill group for the tour – he took the first group and I took the second group. All was fine until my group entered the Holy Place. One of the furniture pieces there was a table used for the bread offering. As I looked at it I noticed that there was a little piece of it broken off, so I joked with the group that Pastor Mark was probably messing with it when he wasn't supposed to and broke part God's Holy Place. We shared a good laugh. Little did we know that I was right! Turns out that while Mark was in there he wanted to see what the Table was made out of, so he grabbed a piece to feel it and, 'clink', he broke it right off ... turns out it wasn't real gold after all. This is a picture of it more recently [picture up on screens] – turns out they heard Mark was coming back so they made one that wasn't quite so fragile. You just never know what's going to happen when you come into God's presence.

When Zechariah entered the actual Temple's Holy Place, he would have done so with much more reverence (than Pastor Mark had) because this was a moment of a lifetime. According to Luke, Zechariah and Elizabeth was an older priestly couple with no children. Their chance of having children was long gone. This, of course, would be a great disappointment to anyone, but particularly in their culture it was considered a sign that God had disgraced them. God obviously didn't care about them or He would have provided children for them. Either that or they had committed some great sin against God and their barrenness was God's punishment. Those were the assumptions of the day. Yet, Luke takes special care to show us that they were upright in the eyes of the Lord. So it just didn't make sense. Why had God not provided for them? They felt this great disgrace – and probably had long given up hope that God would change it – what a disappointment that God had not given them the desire of their hearts. Have you ever been disappointed in God? I bet Zechariah was. I bet Elizabeth was. Still, they remained faithful to God.

We know, of course, that God had something big in mind for them. Look back at verse 8, "Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God," Pause right there for a moment. In Zechariah's day there were thousands of priests. They didn't need them all to be working at the same time, except during the high holidays, so they divided them up into divisions who served at the Temple two weeks each year. Okay, verse 9, "he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense." Now, this was a big deal! The incense offering was done twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. Zechariah's division served only 2 weeks each year in this capacity and probably had about one thousand priests. So, to give every priest an opportunity to make this special offering would take about 35 years. And that doesn't count the times the high priest would have chosen to simply do it himself. This was a 'once in a lifetime' experience! It was one that Zechariah would have been waiting for his whole life.

When Zechariah went in to the Holy Place to do his precious duty, it was definitely his day, because an angel of the Lord showed up. The angel said, ¹³"Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John." Wow! God had heard his prayers! God was going to give Zechariah and Elizabeth a son! And he was going to be no regular son. This son, to be named John, would be great in the sight of the Lord. He would be filled with the Spirit even from birth. He would be used by God to draw God's people back to Him. In the spirit of Elijah, this son, John, would "make a ready a people prepared for the Lord."

There is so much important stuff here about John. This is a very important moment in God's work of salvation. This child, given by God to this faithful but barren couple, would be the one to prepare God's people for the long awaited Messiah. He wasn't just going to be a gift and a delight to his parents, many would rejoice at his birth. He would be used by God as an integral part of the salvation story – the most important story in the history of the world. What a blessing! What an amazing work of God. He heard Zechariah's prayers and He was answering them in grand fashion.

So, how does Zechariah respond? Does he thank the Lord? Does he sing out a song of praise? Does he worship His faithful God? Does he dance with joy? No. His first question – while in the Holy Place, in the presence of God, and talking to angel – is this: ¹⁸"How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." (By the way, this is a good preview of Couples Life; men, never call your wife an old woman, rather say that she is well along in years.) How can I be sure of this? Really? Hello! Zechariah! You are standing in God's temple – the Holy Place. Your whole adult life you have longed for God to give you a son. You have longed for God's Messiah to come. You know the prophecies about one who comes in the spirit of Elijah to prepare God's people for him. Oh, and by the way, yes, that IS an angel that just showed up and talked to you. None of the worshippers snuck in here to see what you were doing. Really? You are not quite sure that what the angel from God said is true because you are old? Really? Yeah, really.

We shouldn't get too down on Zechariah because I bet most of us would have responded the same way. Zechariah had probably prayed for years that God would give him a son – especially during his prime. He prayed harder and harder as each year passed, but then it seemed less and less likely that God would answer. He would have understood the angel's words to be pointing to the advent of the Messiah, but Israel had been waiting generations for the so-called promised Savior to save her. Why now? Why would God finally show up –

during Zechariah's one shot in the temple? It was probably just a dream or a hallucination – maybe there was something funny in the incense. There had probably been a lot of disappointment in Zechariah's life. He never had any children. So many other priests had been chosen to serve before him – I bet he was beginning to think that God wouldn't let him do that either. Those kinds of disappointments in life can easily make someone become cynical. Those kind of disappointments can cause belief to waver.

Have you been disappointed in God before? Maybe you prayed and prayed and prayed for something to happen, but it never did. Even when we are obedient to the Lord, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, God doesn't always give us what we ask for. Did you never get that job you thought you deserved? Did you never get to have the lifestyle you wanted? Did your business venture die? Did your marriage not work out? Did your back pain never go away? Did your kids rebel? Did your church family betray you? Did the help you offered to that neighbor not make a difference? What are the disappointments you had in your life? And what is the status of your heart with those? Have your disappointments turned to cynicism? Have you simply given up praying for those things? Have you decided that God doesn't care?

This Advent season Mark and I felt compelled to preach a series called *The Creep that Stole Christmas*, because it seems that many of us have allowed the creep of life—the creep of disappointment or busyness or noise or consumerism or grief or cynicism or culture—to squeeze to death the true joy and wonder of Christmas. To push to the margins the fact that at Christmas we celebrate the way our God, the creator of the universe—the all-powerful, all-knowing God—became an embryo in a mother's womb that took on flesh and bone to be born a humble birth, to live a life to show the world who God is and how to live God's way and then to die a criminal death so that anyone who believes in Him might be reconciled to God. Today's text bears this question: Have you allowed the creep of your life's disappointments to push aside your joyful belief in the power of God?

Well, after Zechariah's question in the temple, the angel asserts himself. ¹⁹"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 proper time." So, Zechariah was mute. For how long we don't know—at least nine months, but probably longer. That silence served as a sign for Zechariah that God would indeed do what He said He would. Sure enough, after Zechariah went home, God did what He said He would—Elizabeth became pregnant. But Zechariah remained silent. Can you imagine not being able to say a word for that long? But something marvelous happened in Zechariah during his silence. It allowed him space to consider what God was up to. It allowed him space to consider his life's disappointments in light of the faithfulness of God. It allowed space for the words of Gabriel about this son to sink in. And finally, when that baby was born, Zechariah's mouth was opened, at the end of chapter 1, and the first words out of his mouth were praise and prophecy not disappointment or cynicism.

Sometimes silence is golden. Some people like to call me 'mute master'; it's because, no matter where I am, when I'm watching TV I prefer to mute the commercials. I really don't need to hear about what they think I should buy; it just adds to the noise of my life—it's so nice to simply have a few moments of quiet.

What would it look like for you to become a mute master this advent season? I don't mean muting the commercials on TV (although I do highly recommend it), I mean muting yourself before God to simply consider the miracle, the faithfulness, the love, and the salvation of Christmas. Is silence a regular part of your day? Something good seemed to happen in Zechariah during those months of silence. His silence allowed his focus to be more fully on the Lord. It allowed him to hear God more clearly. It allowed him to consider his own unbelief. It allowed him the space to consider what God was doing for him and the entire world.

What if you started each day for the next month with 15 minutes of just absolute silence? What if you turned off the radio during your commute to work? What if there was a night during the week that you simply did not allow the TV to be turned on, and rather, used those times to simply be quiet before God? What if you exercised this week without the iPod, or even the little TV on the front of the treadmill, and simply used that time to listen to God? How could you introduce some silence in your life this advent?

The Psalmist made the connection between silence and belief long ago. He wisely writes in Psalm 46, "Be still and know that I am God." When was the last time you did that? Do you know that He is God? Do you know deep down in heart of hearts that God reigns—that God the Son took on flesh and made his dwelling among us? Don't let your disappointments, or even your cynicism, or even your unbelief be the creep that steals Christmas this year. One way to do that is to simply be quiet. Find ways to be quiet as you prepare for Christmas. Just close your mouths and turn your attention to the Lord. Be still, even in advent, and know that He is God.

Do you know what Zechariah's name means? Zechariah means, "Yahweh remembers". Beloved, no matter what you've been disappointed by in your life. Yahweh remembers you. God has not forgotten about you. God knows you. God loves you. Zechariah and Elizabeth probably prayed for years that God would provide for them a child. They faced public disgrace and private shame because they could not produce a child. Yet they remained faithful to the Lord. And, then, when they were way too old to ever conceive a child on their own, Yahweh remembered, and He gave them a child who would prepare the way of Lord. Even in a moment of weakness—in a moment of unbelief—God didn't take away his promise. He graciously said to Zechariah, "you will be silent ... until the day this happens." May you be silent this season and consider anew the wonder and the majesty of our God become flesh for our salvation. May you be still and know to the core of your being that our Lord is God.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **READ** the passage out loud.
- **REFLECT & APPLY INDIVIDUALLY:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.
- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **DIG DEEPER**
 1. What do we learn about John the Baptist in this passage? Why do you think that is important to Luke?
 2. Why do you think God caused Zechariah to lose his ability to speak? Why not something else? What do you think God was trying to do in Zechariah?
 3. Read Luke 1:57-80. What seems to be the impact of Zechariah's silence on Zechariah?
 4. What do we learn from this story that helps us fight against the creep that steals Christmas?
 5. What is God asking you to do to prepare yourself for Christmas?