

Advent's Unusual Suspects: John, Zechariah and the Joy Revolution

Luke 1:46-80

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~The only way to increase perfect happiness is to invite someone else to share it~

I always find it a bit hard to come to grips with this, but somehow this has become the last Sunday before Christmas, and the last Sunday of Advent again.

And this Advent we have been looking at the unusually common people and places that God chose to use as He brought the spectacular and the miraculous into the mundane world we live in. And we have said that the craziest thing about the Christian Christmas story, the one thing that separates it from all the other myths of the world which have equally amazing components to them, is that ours is established in history.

And so we looked at the historical person King Herod that Luke grounds his story in, and then we turned to the doubting priest Zechariah and his “advanced in age” wife Elizabeth. And we looked at the young, unwed and unimportant girl Mary who was selected to be part of God’s plan of redemption – not because she was particularly holy or pure – but because God is gracious.

And today we are going to continue this story focusing in on John the Baptist and Zechariah. So please open your Bibles back up to Luke chapter 1. And as you turn there would you pray with me?

[Pray]

Let’s pick up the story in verse 57 today.

[Read Luke 1:57-58]

So Elizabeth and Zechariah have finally had their first baby.¹ This is an exciting time, and a scary time. I remember the first few hours after Elliana was born. Nikki had a C-section and so they sent Elliana off with me while she recuperated.

And there I was awkwardly holding this baby by myself. And I hadn’t signed a consent form. I hadn’t done a test – I don’t know what the doctors were thinking! And then finally Nikki wheeled into the room and I was so relieved that someone with mothering instincts had arrived. And then Elliana pooped. And Nikki couldn’t get out of bed. And I looked hopefully at the door for a nurse to arrive and nobody came. And I just sat there and slowly the penny started dropping and I realized this poor kid is stuck with me, I’d better do something.

¹ Outline and some content adapted from Pastor Mark Clark

<http://www.thisisvillagechurch.com/our-media/sermons/an-unlikely-tale-john-zechariah/>

(Accessed December 15, 2015)

And this is where Elizabeth and Zechariah are in this moment. And in spite of all the fear associated with having a first baby there is probably no other moment so full of joy and excitement. And their neighbours and relatives are all there and they are rejoicing with them. And then it comes to the 8th day. Verse 59:

[Read Luke 1:59-61]

So in Jewish tradition the 8th day is when babies are named and when baby boys are circumcised. And the tradition of the day was that the baby boy would take his dad's name. And so everyone is expecting this, and they are talking about it and saying "oh look how cute little Zechariah is. Awww he is so perfect."

And then Elizabeth says "Stop calling him Zechariah, his name is John!"

Now one of the things with relatives and friends is that everyone has a lot of great ideas about how you should raise your kids. Does anyone else have relatives or friends? So some people will tell you "you really need to spank your kids more." And other people will tell you "you had better not spank your kids or we will take them away." And other people will say "you are letting your kids eat way too much sugar." And other people will say "I can't believe how hard you are on your kids." When it comes to parenting everyone has some thoughts about what you should be doing.

And certainly names are a big thing. So Nikki and I chose the names of our kids carefully, and we were just as careful not to tell anyone about them until after they were born because we didn't want to deal with this. And so when Corban got his name people recognized that the paper work was done and he was stuck with this name so mostly they kept their comments to themselves... mostly.

But with Elizabeth and Zechariah John hadn't been named yet so all the relatives weighed in. They concluded Elizabeth was off her rocker and taking advantage of the fact that Zechariah wasn't voicing his opinion. You will remember he had been mute since his run in with the angel 9 months ago. Elizabeth has been enjoying the quiet no doubt.

And so the relatives turn to Zechariah because they are so certain he will have something to say about his wife's autonomy. Look at verse 62:

[Read Luke 1:62-66]

Zechariah responds with confidence. "His name is John!" There is no debate about this. I doubted God, I gave His angel some sass and I didn't speak for the last 9 months. I'm not going to play around with this. God might kill me if I get this wrong. So, who cares what you think. My kid's name is John.

Now here's the take away. All of us feel a certain amount of pressure to live normal lives. And Zechariah felt this pressure too, but he said I'm going to listen to God; I'm not going to listen to people. I'm not even going to listen to people who know me and love me... Can you feel the tension here?

Now we need to dig in here for a bit because it would be so easy to gloss over these words without understanding how unusual, by our standards, Zechariah's obedience is here. And I want to give you two examples of how obedience is seen as unusual, one from the world of finance and one from the world of relationships.

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So two years ago when I preached through the Advent Conspiracy series Nikki and I were convicted that the vast majority of our budget was spent on ourselves. Sure we "tithed", but then all the rest of our money went to meeting the North American "needs" we had become accustomed to.

So here we were some of the richest people in the world and we weren't able to be generous because our house was consuming most of our money. And so we decided to sell our 5 bedroom home and move into a 3 bedroom duplex. And when we told this to the people who were closest to us they tried to talk us out of it. "You're doing what?" They said. "Three bedrooms isn't enough room for you guys. You worked hard to save the money for a down payment on that house, you deserve it. You can afford to give your kids better than that."

And when we didn't listen they said "well, this will just be for a short time and then you will be able to afford to buy your dream home."

And we told them, no, we aren't doing this to save up more for ourselves; we are doing this because we believe everything we have is God's. We want to be able to partner with Him in what He is doing. And if all of our resources are tied up on ourselves we can't do that.

But what we were doing didn't fit with the North American norm of buying the biggest house and the fastest car that you can almost afford. And so people didn't really know what to do with our decision. And they wanted to know "did God really tell you that?" "Did God really say 'move into a smaller house?'" "Did God really...?"

Now this might sound like an honest question from people who care, but the problem is that this question isn't original. It's one of the oldest ever asked. So in the garden the snake asked Eve:

"Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1)

Satan cast doubt on the subject of obedience. And Adam and Eve fell for it. They gave in and allowed their confidence in God's leading to be shaken.

But God had been clear and His will is still clear today. God wants us to live for Him with everything we have got. He gives each of us 1 talent or 5 talents or 10 talents and in the end He expects a 100% return on His investment.² That means He expects us to be all in – not just 10% in.

And for sure being all in includes our wealth as North Americans. And we are wealthy. I've shown this graph before, but it is worth seeing again. The fact is the poorest among us who scrape by on social assistance making roughly \$12,000 a year are richer than 85% of everyone who has ever lived. And those of us living on or above the relatively average income of \$55,000 a year rank in as the richest 1 percent of everyone who has ever lived.³

So we need to stop complaining that we don't have enough. We need to stop thinking we aren't rich and start recognizing that the reason we don't have more is because our rate of consumption has become ridiculous. And we need to recognize that the Bible is clear about how the rich are to live. God's will is that we live in a way that proves we aren't from here, we belong to another kingdom. That's clear. The only thing that isn't clear is whether we are going to obey.

So ask yourself does the way I spend God's resources reflect the fact that I belong to His kingdom? Or have I bought into the Canadian lie that I deserve what I've earned, and am squandering most of His money on myself?

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So that's the way it is with our resources, but what about our relationships? Are we unusually obedient or do we think the same way our neighbours do?

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So some of you are struggling in your relationship with your spouse. It doesn't feel fair and you are wondering "Do I have to keep loving my spouse even when he or she isn't holding up their part of the bargain? She's not doing her 50% and I'm not happy. Does God really want me to stay with him, or am I free to get out and pursue my own happiness?" After all God wants us to be happy doesn't He?

But God's will is again clear. God wants us to pursue holiness not happiness. And He wants us to do this because He knows that when we are holy it will make us happy too. On the other hand He knows that if we pursue happiness outside of holiness both will continually escape us.

So God's will is that you look like Jesus to your spouse – not easy but clear right? So what did Jesus do? Well praise God He didn't look at us and say "they aren't holding up their part of the bargain, they aren't being nice to Me, so I'm not going to be born and die for them." Instead He took to the cross while we were still His enemies.⁴

² Matthew 25:14-30

³ Based on US funds. See www.givingwhatwecan.org to calculate how rich you actually are.

⁴ Romans 5:8

So choose to do the same; love and serve your spouse regardless of whether they reciprocate. Now here's the catch: God says look like Jesus to your spouse because it will make you happy. Pursue holiness to get happiness. This is what Jesus did.

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And this brings up something crucial. It wasn't just sacrifice when Jesus died for us. In fact sacrifice isn't really the right word. Hebrews tells us:

For the joy set before Him [Jesus] endured the cross (Hebrews 12:2)

So the picture is of delaying gratification in order to get what you really want. Do you see that?

When I was a kid my parents taught me about delayed gratification. So for Christmas I could have anything I wanted, I just had to pay half for it. So that meant if I wanted something good – and I always did – I had to save up. Now it sounded draconian to my friends that I had to buy my own presents, but I got what I wanted!

Similarly Jesus death for us was an act of delayed gratification. Jesus didn't just die for you and me because He loved us so much and we were worth the sacrifice. He died for us in order to get what He wanted.

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Now this sounds strange. It sounds selfish. But let me explain.

I want to tackle this in two ways. So first let's define selfishness. It means to put yourself and your desires above the needs or desires of those around you? It is to say "I am more important than you." Agreed?

And we all recognize that since all people have equal value whenever someone puts themselves first they are acting in error because they are not more important. That's what makes their act selfish. But this breaks down when God enters the equation. He is worth more than all of us combined. So it's not selfish for Him to say "I am worth more than you." In fact it would be idolatry for Him to put us before Himself because that would be making us His god. And God isn't an idolater. You aren't God's God, God's God is God.

So that means that you and I aren't worth God's death. If I build something out of Lego, no matter how cool it is, I'm not going to die for it – it's not worth it. And it is the same with us. In ourselves we aren't valuable enough for **God** to die for us. So there had to be something more – and there is.

So God has always existed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And He has been perfectly happy and content for eternity. And at one point God decided to create humanity.

But He didn't do this because He was bored or lonely, or lacked anything, but because He wanted to share His happiness with us. Why? Here it is: **the only way to increase perfect happiness is to invite someone else to share it.**

So He created us to join Him in reveling in His glory. And He knew that when we would do this we would be as happy as He is. And He wanted this for us. So the Westminster Catechism tells us why God created us saying:

The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

So God created us to pursue our joy in Him. But then sin entered the picture and we stopped being able to do what we were created to do. And we stopped being happy. Life out of the Garden was not what it had been cracked up to be!

And so Jesus came and died in order to make us be able to do what we were created for in the first place. We would be able to re-enter our relationship with God and enjoy Him forever. And when we do this we find ourselves to be the most fulfilled. But something even more important happens at this moment and that is that God gets to share His happiness in Himself with us – He regains the only way He can increase His perfect happiness. So Jesus died for us, for the joy set before Him. God died for us... for Him.

If you're not content with that explanation I've put a link in the footnotes for you to follow for a bit more in depth study on this.⁵

But that's the first way to look at this, but there is another to consider. God's will for us is to look like Him to each other. So God created us to pursue our joy in Him – that's primary – but in a certain way we reflect that by pursuing our joy in each other. So let's return to the issue of relationships. God's will is: husband love your wife as Christ loved the church.⁶ Now Jesus loved the church for the joy set before Him, so love your wife for yourself. This is when your marriage will be healthiest and happiest. If you're not convinced consider this example:

If I come home on my birthday and say to my wife, "Tonight's about me and so I've reserved us a spot at our favorite restaurant. And all I want to do tonight is spend time with you because nothing makes me happier than to be with you." How does she respond? She doesn't turn around and say "you are so selfish!" She gushes and feels loved.⁷ Why?

Because when we pursue our own happiness in someone else we honour and elevate them. We say "you are my treasure."

⁵ If you are concerned about this question check out <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/did-christ-die-for-us-or-for-god> for an in depth explanation.

⁶ Ephesians 5:25

⁷ Illustration adapted from John Piper

And this is what God wants from us – He wants to be our treasure. And He knows that when He is treasured most by us we will find ourselves to be the most fulfilled and happy because He is the only treasure worth dedicating our lives to. It's only when we pursue Him with every talent we've got that we don't waste our lives. So friend, reflect God's self-interest; pursue your greatest joy in the greatest being who exists, and find your greatest fulfillment in the process.

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Here is where we return to Zechariah's predicament. Sometimes the pressure from friends and family is the hardest thing we encounter because they inadvertently want to protect us from doing God's will. "Stay safe. Don't risk your comfort or future." They think that we will be happiest if we do it the North American way instead of God's way.

But Zechariah says: there is no debate here. I'm doing what God wants. God's will is clear, and I'm pursuing my joy in Him.

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And look what happens to Zechariah as he obeys. Verse 64 says: "Immediately his mouth was opened... and he began to speak, praising God"

So notice that Zechariah doesn't come out of 9 months of silence sullen and pouting. He comes out full of joy and praising God.

Our sinful nature tells us if we do what God wants then we will be miserable – it's going to be a sacrifice. Satan said to Eve, if you obey then you won't know what God knows. He's keeping something from you. And if you obey you are going to have less than you could.

But there is a lie in his words. The lie is "getting what God doesn't want you to have is better. God is holding out on you. He wants to keep you miserable, and that's why He has given you these rules. So throw them off, eat the forbidden fruit and you will be happy."

But Zechariah defies this by pledging obedience out of joy. And he is so joyful that he bursts into song. Friends, this is something you will not experience outside of obedience. You won't have God's joy unless you live in God's will. So test yourself: question am I living in abundant joy, or perhaps have I been pursuing happiness outside of what God wants for me?

Now God's will doesn't mean just avoiding sin, it means pursuing holiness. It means running after God saying "How can I honour You with what you've given me?" If you want happiness ask yourself "How could I do that more?"

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Now because joy is tied to living in God's will it isn't surprising that in the birth narrative of Jesus, God's unusual suspects, these incredibly common people, are continually singing for joy.

So Mary sings and Zechariah sings and the angels sing to the shepherds and Simeon sings. And they all sing for two reasons. First because song is the natural response when we see God's salvation breaking into our world, and second because singing is the way we pledge allegiance to the King.

So look at how Zechariah's song both responds to God's salvation and pledges allegiance to a kingdom his relatives couldn't see. Look at verse 68:

[Read Luke 1:68-79]

That is a worship song! So Zechariah sings because he sees God's salvation breaking into his world. God has become one of us, and the result is redemption and salvation and rescue and light shining on those living in the darkness of the shadow of death. Have you tasted what Zechariah saw? If yes, are you singing?

You see God's people have always used song to respond to His salvation. So Moses and Miriam sang after Pharaoh's army was drown in the Sea.⁸ Israel sang when God provided water in the desert.⁹ The judge Deborah sang after God gave her victory over the commander of Canaan's armies.¹⁰ And of course the whole book of Psalms is chocked full of David's songs of worship in response to God moving powerfully in his life.

Song is the way God's people respond when He shows up in their lives and brings them deliverance.

And so this is one of the main reasons we sing in church. We don't sing to prepare our hearts to hear the message better. We don't sing to raise our emotions and usher in some sense of the supernatural. We sing because God has come down and redeemed us. He's paid off the wages of sin we've earned and enabled us to return to the relationship with Himself He created us to enjoy.

So friends, do you have a song in your heart this Christmas? Have you experienced God's salvation? Don't leave here without it.

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The second reason song is so pivotal, and we will conclude with this, is that we use it to pledge our allegiance to things. Now the most obvious evidence of this is that every nation has an anthem. And when we sing O Canada we say "there is something about the dirt here that owns me."

⁸ Exodus 15

⁹ Numbers 21:17

¹⁰ Judges 5

Now some people are dual citizens, but really that is an oxymoron. It's impossible to swear allegiance to two flags or two kings. And certainly if you know your history you remember the difficulties that German and Japanese Canadians and Americans faced in the early 1940's.¹¹ When conflict arises dual citizenship dies. And the reality is we are living in a war right now, we are in the middle of a revolution.

And so in verse 68 Zechariah gives praise to God as the only source of redemption. The praise he offers is unconditional and complete because the salvation God has given has been total. Zechariah's allegiance belongs to God.

And when we sing we declare our allegiance to the one true King. We say to God and we remind ourselves that we are not double minded. Our allegiance belongs to Him alone and this dictates the way we live our lives.

So while our culture says this is what women are worth and this is what sex is about and this is what you should do with your money, we sing a new tune. And we are aren't just 10% in, we are all in! We sing declaring that the Kingdom of God is at hand and that the baby born in the manger is Lord and King. Amen?

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So I want to encourage you to approach singing differently in church. Sing with passion; more passion than you sing O Canada. Sing with your whole heart. Sing even if you don't like to sing or can't hold a tune because by doing this you are declaring "I know who my Lord is, and I'm giving myself to Him. And so I sing. I don't just watch. I enter in and practice what I'm going to be doing for all eternity. I say Jesus is my source of joy and it brings Him joy for me to find my joy in Him. This is why I exist, this is my identity.

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So as we come to the end of Advent, as we remember back to God's first arrival 2000 years ago, and His decision to combine the miraculous with the mundane – the spectacular with the unusually common, let's remember that He did it for a reason. He came to re-inaugurate the Kingdom He had initially created, and to invite us in to give Him glory and enjoy Him forever.

So God has a plan for you this Christmas. Even though you and I are unusual suspects ourselves; certainly we are no more exceptional than Zechariah or Elizabeth or Mary or John and yet God has a plan for us. So give yourself the greatest gift this Christmas, align your life with God's will for you. Pursue it either for the first time or in a new way. And give praise to the God who gives spectacular meaning to the unusually common, for His glory.

¹¹ For more on this see <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-dual-citizenship-20141228-story.html>