

Sermon
9 December 2018
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald
Reading: Luke 1:5-7, 11-25, 57-66
Gift Service

Today we are taking a look at the 2nd important birth story in our Advent series – the birth of John.

Last week we read the birth story of Samson – and as you've probably noticed, there are quite a few similarities:

An angel announced that a woman who thought she would be childless would have a child, and this child had to be dedicated to God, and wouldn't be allowed to ever take wine or any fermented drink. In both stories the dads are full of questions, they find the news hard to believe, but a major difference between the stories is that the angel appeared to Samson's mum first, and then to his dad; where the angel only appeared to John's dad. Although Samson's dad found the news hard to believe, he believed the angel straight away when he met him, but Zachariah didn't.

So where last week we focused on Samson's mum, like we usually do when we talk about babies and births, I would like us to look at today's story from a different angle.

Let's read this story through the eyes of John's dad.

Zachariah. A good man. A priest with a good reputation and all the right names in his family tree. The only thing lacking in his life was someone to follow in his footsteps one day.

Although he accepted that that's just the way it was going to be, he quietly kept praying to God for a son.

But to be honest – I don't think he really thought that God would ever answer his prayer.

So, when the angel appeared to him, he got a huge fright! Which is probably a very appropriate response for an unexpected encounter with the divine. And it wasn't just any angel – it was Gabriel, who was well known for appearances like these.

What strikes me as quite ironic here, is the fact that Zachariah, who's JOB it was to talk to God on behalf of others, was *in* the temple *at* the altar – the *place* where people went if they wanted to meet with God; when this happened – and he still got the fright of his life!

So it's obviously not for nothing that angels always start a conversation with: "Do not be afraid!"

To be lost for words in a situation like this is understandable, but being speechless would soon get a whole new meaning for Zachariah! Because when he heard what the angel had to say to him, he just couldn't believe him.

And it's here where I know it's so much easier to understand a situation when you are looking at it from the outside, because seriously – what more did he want? Was meeting an actual ANGEL not enough evidence that this was all true?

So because he didn't believe the angel, his speech was taken away from him until the day his son was born.

Maybe it was a good thing. Maybe he would never have stopped asking questions, maybe he would have driven Elizabeth crazy, so he had nine months to think about what happened in the temple that day, and to realise how big God is.

I'm pretty sure where usually Elizabeth would probably have loved some peace and quiet, in this specific situation she must have been wondering about so many things, and the only man who could possibly answer her questions, couldn't get a word out.

It's not as if the 2 of them could now just change over to texting each other the whole time, which is probably what people today would do... I'm actually quite surprised that both of them could read and write, seeing that that was not a given in those days.

And you know, this thought made me giggle a bit, because I realised if something similar was to happen today, the angel should probably stop all mobile networks from working for 9 months! Because so many people don't talk to each other in any case anymore, they are glued to their phones almost all the time! So take the phone away, and communication becomes very very difficult!

But to get back to the sermon...

As I told the kids, a couple of weeks ago, André was in the Netherlands for a week to participate in a research project for the Church of Scotland.

And, the first day he was away – I just loved the peace and quiet! I'm sure you'll all understand what I mean – you all know how much he can talk!!

And I thought that I would feel that way all week long... But no. The house was so quiet without him, my ears literally started ringing. I really missed him talking all the time.

And he was only away for a week. Zachariah couldn't speak for nine months!!

But when God's promise became a reality, when the baby was born and Zacharia made sure that he was called John like the angel instructed, things went back to normal again.

God gave Zachariah a very special gift.

Look at the picture – isn't it just lovely how everybody is clasping their hands together? In praise? In prayer? Because they are all so happy for Zacharia – who is holding his son like only a proud father can – which of course was also something that wasn't done in those days. It's was the mother's job to hold the baby.

But everything that happened to Zachariah must have changed him. You don't have an encounter with God like that and then stay exactly the same person you were before...

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We might live many years after all this happened, in a different land with a different culture. But God is still God, and he still touches our lives, and blesses us with all kinds of gifts.

We should just be open to be surprised by him!

Gifts come in many different shapes and sizes.

My gift from André after his trip was a wee handbag – saying: “I missed you, I thought about you.”

This is the time of year when we are all buying gifts for the people we love, something they need, something they want, or just something to make them feel special.

And then here, under our Christmas tree this morning, is gifts that you brought for Bethany Christian Trust. Gifts that will go to people we don't know, but gifts that might just change their lives forever too.

Because sometimes, a small gesture like that is all someone needs not to lose hope. The realisation that there are people out there who care. People who care enough to give a little of their time and money in this busiest of seasons to buy something for a complete stranger.

And if I can be completely honest with you – THAT is something that leaves *me* speechless. How people here in this country, in our community, can care so much and give so much to people they don't even know...

Thank you for allowing God to touch those who receive of these gifts through you...

And not only through these gifts, but through all the other projects we have at this time of year: the shoeboxes, the Foodbank, the African Children's Choir, and through all the other projects we support through the rest of the year as well.

And also through just being friendly and kind, neighbourly, supportive and helpful to friend and stranger...

Thank you for being like angels, bringing hope to people in despair.

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We can say that John's birth was a miracle. But then, what birth is not a miracle? It's not only in the events that leave us speechless that the hand of God is to be found, it's also in the small, everyday things.

Our story ends with an open-ended question: "What then is this child going to be?"

We know who John the Baptist became. The forerunner of Jesus, the one to prepare the world for what was to come...

A special baby indeed. As John grew up, he did exactly what God expected him to do.

Let's be the same.

In this season of Christmas, let's *shout it out to the world* that we belong to God! And let's do it, because we *can*.

Amen