

Title: You finish what you begin
Text: Luke 1.5-25
Theme: God keeps his promises
Series: Luke #2
Prop Stmtnt: God keeps his promises in ways that cause wonder and worship

Read Text:

The prophecies of Scripture, which are the promises of God, are so astounding in their fulfillment that it has caused many to accuse them of being written after the fulfillment, because they can't believe how accurate they are. But God has done it this way to be irrefutable evidence that he indeed exists, that he is involved in our lives, is carrying out his plan and will not be stopped. God finishes what he begins. How many of you have unfinished projects? We all have stories. But God's projects are never behind schedule and will always get done.

This text and the several accounts that follow here in chapter 1 display the sovereignty of God and the faithfulness of God. Sovereignty because God sends the angel Gabriel to Zechariah to deliver a personal message that informs Zechariah about a big change coming to him and Elizabeth. But this is so much bigger than Zechariah and Elizabeth. God is publicly inserting himself into this world. He is intervening in such a way that he is directly and obviously disrupting the normal flow of life. Angels do not normally show up and deliver messages to us directly from God. They can and they have, but when they do it is because there is a specific event taking place in the plan of God that he wants us to know about. In this case, the time has come for the incarnation of the Son of God. God is about to come into this world. God is about to take on human flesh and be born into this world. That is huge! That is phenomenal. And because it is so amazing, so unusual, so miraculous, so out of the box, so unanticipated, God does not want you to miss it. If you miss it, it will only be because you have chosen to. God chooses to announce this ahead of time through the nation of Israel, through the messages of the prophets, through the record of his word and through his orchestration of history. Once again God is demonstrating that he rules over the details of history and he does in such a way that continuously displays his faithfulness to his promises. You finish what you begin.

Because God is faithful:

1. **You can be faithful no matter what.** (5-7)

It is easier to be faithful when the people around you and above you are faithful, but Luke introduces us to a husband and wife who are faithful to God in spite of who is in leadership.

A. No matter who is in leadership

This event takes place "in the days of Herod, king of Judea." This Herod was not a Jew. He was not the rightful king in the line of David. He was beholden to Rome and Rome awarded him this position and he ruled for a little more than 40 years. The Jews would never accept him as being

legitimate, even though he rebuilt the Temple for them and he did it on a scale that made it one of the most impressive structures in the world. Part of the reason why the Jews never liked Herod was because he was an ego-maniac and an evil man. He murdered every one whom he deemed to be a threat to him which meant that he murdered a lot of people, including his sons.

But Luke does not tell us about the king. Luke introduces us to a Levitical priest by the name of Zechariah who was of the division of Abijah, which becomes an important detail in a moment. But you should also know that at this time, the office of high priest had become very political. One family controlled this position and used it for their own power. Zechariah was a lower-level priest married to a woman named Elizabeth who was also from the tribe of Levi. Luke describes her as being *“from the daughters of Aaron.”* Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were *“righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.”* (6). This is God’s assessment of Zechariah and Elizabeth. I cannot think of a greater commendation than this and this was in spite of the world they lived in.

The Roman government was pagan and full of idolatry. Herod was a moral trainwreck and the Levitical priests were corrupt all the way at the top. In spite of that, here was at least one couple (and there were more) who were faithful to God, no matter what. The term *“righteous before God”* means that they faithfully followed the law of God. And, in that respect, they were blameless. This does not mean sinless; it means that there was nothing in their lives that was not resolved between them and God. They believed God and the evidence of that belief was how they took his laws and commands seriously and obeyed them. You could not find anything in them that was out of order. And, we might ask, what did it get them? Because v.7 drops the bomb. *“They had no child.”* But they are old now and still righteous, so it is clear that they believed God not in order to get a child, but because God is worth believing, no matter what.

B. No matter what you are lacking

When we began the series in 1 Samuel, we were introduced to Hannah who was unable to conceive. Her husband had another wife and he was able to have children with her, so this was a burden that Hannah in particular bore. There seems to be some similarity here since Luke, the doctor notes the reason. *“Because Elizabeth was barren.”* Now, the other shoe drops. *“both were advanced in years.”*

As part of the sermon on Hannah, I asked those of you who were trying to conceive and were unable to, to get word to me, if you wanted and I and the elders would pray for you. In the end, we know that life comes from God. It is in his hands. Since then, there have been 5 pregnancies from those who requested prayer. I have sat here while Chad has led the parent/baby dedication and felt a deeper connection to Hannah when she named Samuel saying, *“I asked the Lord for him.”* But, as much as I/we rejoice in these specific answers to prayer, not all of the couples have conceived. There are others and for the many of you who have experienced this, it is passages like this that can reopen the wound.

But in the NT days, the issue was even stronger and therefore the sense of “being cursed” could naturally feel heavier. You did not work until you were 65, then move to the Villages in FL, where you rode around in golf carts in order to play bridge or pickleball. You worked until you could not work and then moved in with your kids who took care of you until you died. If you had no kids, you had no one to take care of you. The 5th command to “honor your father and mother” had a lot more to do with taking care of them when they were old than it did to just make your bed, cut the grass and load the dishwasher without lipping off. The point being, if you had no kids, your future was insecure. What is going to happen to me? Who is going to take care of me? Am I going to be left all alone? Therefore, we naturally see how easy it is for those who could not have kids to doubt God. If God has not provided for me now, what confidence do I have that he will provide for me in the life to come? By the way, Zechariah means “Yahweh has remembered again.” It sure didn’t feel that way, did it?

And yet, in spite of all of this, Zechariah and Elizabeth had a resilient faith. God was worthy of their faith-driven obedience, no matter what. As we will see, they did not believe perfectly, but they believed God. They did not know the reasons for their inability to conceive, but God did and it was obvious that they trusted God, no matter what. And they had reason to. Their story was a familiar one. Abraham and Sarah. Elkanah and Hannah. Manoah and his wife. All were unable to have children. All were given a message from God. All had a son who factored significantly the plan of God. Zechariah and Elizabeth trusted that God had a plan and that there was a reason and now, they were about to find out.

If Zechariah and Elizabeth wanted to find circumstances as reasons to turn their backs on God, they had them. How did they maintain their faithfulness? They were righteous, but had no children. No doubt there were plenty of people around them who could care less about God’s law and they had no problems conceiving. How many times do we wonder why those who are willing to shout their abortion can get pregnant while those who would love to raise children in the knowledge of God, can’t? Being righteous and being childless is very difficult to reconcile. And yet, they had a resilient faith. God meant more to them than having a child, as he should. What about you? What are your circumstances that, if you wanted to, would make it convenient to throw in the towel of faith? Who has been in leadership over you or around you who has let you down or who is just plain evil? What about your own life setting? What are your disappointments that make you tempted to believe that God does not know or does not care? Have you allowed those to block your view of the cross? Have you focused on those to the point where you have lost sight of God’s amazing grace to come to us and for us? That is what this account is all about. And now, Zechariah finds himself on the stage of God’s plan, but not how he ever imagined.

2. **God’s plan will bring you amazement and joy** (8-17)

The men from the tribe of Levi were organized into 24 divisions. Each division was made up of about 750 men who would come to Jerusalem for one week, twice a year and serve in the temple. There were many things to do, including assisting young couples who were offering sacrifices because of the recent birth of a child, as we will see later in chapter 2. Twice a day

(morning and evening), one of the priests on duty would be chosen by lot to go into the actual Temple itself and offer up or burn the fresh incense. That means that in the course of your week, only 14 out of the 750 would be chosen. If you were ever chosen, you only did it once. Many would never get the honor. That means that (9) when Zechariah was chosen by lot *“to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense”* that he had not done this before. For a Levitical priest this was the pinnacle moment of being a priest. Given the fact that *“the whole multitude of the people were praying outside”* I am guessing that Zechariah was chosen for the evening sacrifice, which was around 3.30p. The seriousness of this moment, is difficult to overstate. Zechariah is going into the Temple of God, where he is offering incense, which, as he would know had a purpose. Incense was a sweet aroma and functioned as a means to keep distance between a holy God and sinful man. In addition to that, there are throngs of people outside who are praying. And when you understand some of the recent historical events, you will realize why this was a season of intensity. So, if that was not enough pressure upon this guy, he gets into the Temple, where he is all by himself, at least that what he thinks on this side of the curtain, when an angel shows up on the right side of the altar of incense. (12) Luke’s choice of words here are intense. Zechariah was terrified and he was stuck. The angel was at the altar of incense. Zechariah had to face the angel because he had to burn the incense.

A. God really knows.

Angels do not show up every day. Having conversations with angels is not normal and is no game. It happens from time to time when God is about to do something unusual, like here. Think of all of the details that went into this moment. Most of the time, God works providentially through the normal means of life. What happens here is not normal, because what is about to happen is extraordinary. The first thing that the angel has to do, is keep Zechariah from passing out, going into Afib or Cardiac arrest. *“Do not be afraid, Zechariah...”* I almost feel bad for the angels like Gabriel. Every time they show up, the first thing they have to say, is *“Don’t be afraid.”* I suppose they are used to it by now, and probably bring along a defibrillator, but I think it would get old that every time someone sees you, they freak out. But this is the good news and terrifying news. The good news is that we are not alone. The supernatural world is real. There are so many realities that we do not see, nor understand, but are all around us. God sees us. God is involved in our lives. God really knows and once again, he speaks. This is the first time in 400 years that God has spoken. This is huge! An angel shows up to someone, like you, who did not expect it and had no idea how much his life was known by (and loved by) God. He had reason to believe that he did not matter. And here is an angel! And the angel is telling him not to be afraid, and then calls him by name. Wait! How do you know my name?! And then comes this. *“Your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth (he knows her name too) will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.”* God knows who you are and God knows who your son is going to be and has already chosen his name.

B. God really hears. (13) - *“Your prayer has been heard.”*

V.7 describes Zechariah and Elizabeth as being *“advanced in years.”* Zechariah describes himself in v.18 as *“an old man”* and repeats that Elizabeth is *“advanced in years.”* The text is clearly

communicating that these two are beyond the child-bearing years. All of that is part of why Gabriel shows up. You are going to be surprised. You are going to have a son and your son has a mission. Gabriel tells Zechariah that his prayer has been heard. Is that referring to Zechariah's prayer for a child? It could be. If that is the case, and if Zechariah and Elizabeth are beyond the child-bearing years, then it sounds like God is answering prayers now that Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed years ago. I love the fact that Gabriel links his announcement to a good God answering the prayers of Zechariah. If Zechariah had prayed that way and very likely no longer prayed for a son because of his age, this announcement would be part of the joy because Zechariah and Elizabeth would realize that for all those years, God had heard their prayers and was answering them in a way that they would never have imagined. It is also possible that Zechariah has been praying for the coming of the Messiah. If that is the case then Gabriel is letting Zechariah know that his prayer for the Messiah is being answered in a way that involves him and Elizabeth as the unlikely parents of the Elijah figure who comes before. Either way, God hears and answers prayer in a way that is way better than Zechariah could have imagined.

C. **God really loves.** (14-15a) - *"You will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord."*

This is so rich to consider. Gabriel is telling Zechariah that he is going to have joy and gladness. God is the cause of all of this. God is answering Zechariah's prayers from long ago and now, Zechariah is going to have joy and gladness not only because he and Elizabeth are finally going to have a son, but this son is going to be great before the Lord. It is not just his birth, but his life will be a joy. What kind of a God shows up and does unusual things for you to have joy and gladness? A God who loves you, that's who! It is not just the fact that Zechariah is going to have a son, but that his son is going to play an important part in the mission and plan of God.

D. **God is really involved.** (15b-17)

John has a special mission. He is marked from before his birth to fulfill a role that was prophesied in the OT (Malachi 4.5-6 final 2 verses of the OT.) Because of that John is not permitted to drink wine or strong drink. This is not because there is something wrong with drinking wine. Obviously not, since Jesus drank wine and even turned water into wine. But the fact that John did not do it, made him so unusual. It was expected for people to drink wine and John's abstinence was a means that marked him as being set apart for a unique role. This looks similar to a Nazarite vow (Numbers 6.1-21), but could be an ascetic vow short of a Nazarite one.

400 years before, the OT closed with a prophecy that Elijah would come to prepare the people of God for the Messiah. Now Gabriel shows up and tells Zechariah that is happening, right now. This Elijah to come is going to be your son, John. God has not forgotten his promise. God made a promise and is keeping it. God is all over this and will never fail to keep his Word. Then Gabriel basically repeats Malachi 4.5-6 and describes what John is going to do. *He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him (before the Lord) 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.” John is the occasion for joy because he is the forerunner of the source of ultimate joy.

This is a lot to take in especially when you are supposed to burning the incense in the Temple and you end up having a conversation with an angel. But this is good for our souls. I think all of us have been tempted to wonder if our prayers have any affect at all. We are so prone to think that God is silent because God doesn't care, only to find out that God's plan is so good and so big that our hearts cannot contain it. But...

3. **God's plan comes at a cost.** (18-23)

In Zechariah's case, he didn't quite believe it. By asking "How shall I know this?" he doubted God's word. Gabriel said so in v.20. The fact that an angel appeared to him in the Temple was not good enough. He wanted more. So, he got a sign. He lost his voice and was told that he would not be able to speak until his son was born. V.62 seems to indicate that he was unable to hear for that time as well. Look at all the ways in which God has revealed himself. What is your excuse for not believing? Do you need God to take something away so that you will just believe him? God gave Zechariah a front row seat and a very clear message. The privilege of revelation carries with it the responsibility to believe. What God reveals, he expects you and I to believe it and submit to it. There is really no excuse. He is God and he has spoken. We are his creation, we follow. Why wouldn't we? But, when we do, as Zechariah and Elizabeth did, we should realize that God's plan for our joy comes at a cost. We will be out of step with this world, we will be misunderstood, we will even be accused of things that are designed to marginalize us. This would be true for Zechariah and Elizabeth and certainly for John. He carried out his mission so faithfully that later on Jesus described him as the greatest of men born of women. Yet, you could hardly say that John enjoyed his best life now. For his willingness to speak the truth and live faithfully, he was executed at just over 30 years of age by another wicked king Herod.

4. **God's plan is worth embracing.** (24-25)

This text concludes with the news that Elizabeth conceives but apparently keeps this hidden from others for at least 5 months. How do you explain this to people? How is she supposed to understand this herself? Look at v.25. Elizabeth fully embraces God's plan and she accepts her role and the blessing of God to her and through her.

God's plan rarely keeps us in our comfort zones.