

**Sermon – Zechariah’s Song**  
**Sunday December 11, 2011**

We’re in that time of year when you’ve probably been hearing Christmas music everywhere you go. You hear it in the malls, you hear it in your car on the radio.

Anyone here like Christmas music? I love Christmas music! I actually created a *genre* on my iPod that I’ve labelled “Christmas”... and I’ve got the best collection of Christmas songs! I’ve got classics like Vince Guaraldi, Bing Crosby and Elvis. I’ve got contemporary Christmas albums by Boyz II Men, Mariah Carey, 98 degrees.

Have you ever noticed how Christmas songs can make you feel like a kid again? You get all giddy and sentimental. You remember Christmases you celebrated as a child opening up your Superman watch or your new Transformer toy.

Of course, Christmas isn’t about that “Christmas feeling.” Good Christmas songs and carols are the ones that help us to remember and celebrate Jesus’ birth. One Christmas carol many of us are familiar with is the song O Holy Night. I love the line in it that goes: “Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.”

But probably for most of us, just listening to Christmas songs helps us to anticipate the coming of Christmas.

Whether it’s a matter of week, days or hours, if you’re hearing a Christmas song, you probably know that Christmas is around the corner. You don’t have to wait much longer.

But this idea of waiting, is actually behind the very first Christmas over two thousand years ago. Because during that time, there was a group, a remnant of Jewish people who waited every day, every year – not for the arrival of Santa Claus – but for the arrival of God’s Messiah.

You see, there were prophecies in the Bible that spoke of One who would be born of a virgin in David’s royal city. One who would sit on the throne of his father David and rule over the house of Jacob forever. One who would rule the nations and redeem his people and restore Israel to its former glory.

And in every generation, there were people who waited for this Messiah. This went on for generations and generations. Most of these people died without ever seeing

the fulfillment of these promises. And while many people abandoned the faith and thought this whole thing was a fairy tale and wondered Who in the world would commit their lives to these promises that were given hundreds of years ago, there was also a remnant of faithful Jews who got up everyday thinking, this could be the day the Messiah shows up.

This morning, we're continuing our Christmas series called Soul Music for a Festive Season. The gospel writer Luke who records the events surrounding that first Christmas, the birth of Jesus includes songs of praises from some of the key characters in this story.

This morning, we're going to look at one of these characters - a man called Zechariah. His song is known as the "Benedictus", which is Latin for *praise* or *blessing* and it comes from the first word from his song. He along with his wife Elizabeth were among those faithful Jews who continued to believe that God would remain faithful to the promises he had made to his people so long ago.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to Luke 1:5.

While you get there, here's why this message is so relevant for us. It's because at some point in our lives God will seem silent, God will seem inactive, God will seem like He's not doing anything. And you'll be wondering, Why am I doing all this? Why am I attending, serving, giving, obeying, missing out... Why am I continuing to live my life as if there's something bigger than me? Does all this really even make a difference?

And if you've ever had these questions or doubts, this story is for you. Because the story of the two characters we'll be looking at is really your story and mine.

Let's look at verse 5.

<sup>5</sup> In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

In other words, these were people who were living for God, they were obeying God. Even when people around them made compromises in their faith, even when people around them walked away from their faith – they continued to live their lives as if the Messiah was coming, as if God would fulfill His promises.

It kind of makes you wonder, with such an incredible faith, how did God bless Zechariah and Elizabeth. We read in the next verse.

<sup>7</sup> But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

So here are these people who've been faithfully living for God, who've been faithfully serving God yet have no child. They probably spent a lot of time praying about it, their families probably prayed, their friends prayed, their community prayed— but in this regard, it would have seemed like God was silent.

And they lived with the pain of this into their old age. And what's amazing about their faith is that their faith was based on a promise that God had made thousands of years ago.

Back in Genesis 12, God spoke with Abraham and made him a promise which is really central to our faith. God said that He would bless Abraham and He did. God said He would make Abraham's name great – and he did. God said He would bless those who bless him and curse those who curse him – and for awhile He did. And then God said all peoples on earth will be blessed through him.

And if you know the story, Abraham had a son who had a son who had a bunch of sons. And they all moved to Egypt. Later on they left Egypt and became a nation. Eventually they got their own land – the land God had promised them. And this land was called... This nation became a kingdom and experienced a Golden Era under King...

And it looked like if there ever a time Israel was going to bless all nations, this would have been the time. Because after David, Solomon enjoyed a good reign. But then after Solomon everything fell apart. The kingdom split into two – there were good kings and bad kings, there were wars and exiles. And between that time and the time of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the nation of Israel had changed hands over 25 times: the Syrians took them over, the Babylonians took them over, the Greeks took them over, the Persians took them over...

The glory of the nation of Israel was certainly not what it had once been. It had no army, it had no wealth, it had no land, it didn't even have its own independence because, what empire was in power during this time? Rome. The powerful Roman empire.

And so the idea that little Israel could get out of this Roman oppression and make an international impact just didn't make any sense! To most people, it would never happen.

After all, for the last 700 years, Israel was on a violent downward spiral. But at least for some of that time, God still spoke, God still did miracles, God still sent his prophets to declare his word – to encourage them, to comfort them, to challenge them.

But for the last 400 years, God was silent. There were no miracles, no prophets, no word from God. In fact, do you know what Bible historians call this period when God was silent for 400 years? The 400 years of silence. Just to get some perspective on this - We all know it's been a long time since the Leafs last won the Stanley Cup, right? And what year was that? 1967 – 44 years a long time.

Imagine that our drought started 400 years ago. That would have meant, we last won the Cup in 1611. Canada wasn't even a nation. The King James Bible had just been translated. Galileo had just improved on the telescope. Imagine that was the last time the Leafs won the Stanley Cup.

Well, if you think we've been waiting a long time for the Cup, that's how long the Jews had been waiting for God to speak again.

Because the last time the Jews had heard from God there was the strange prophecy. The prophet Malachi uttered these words:

<sup>5</sup> “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup> He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.” (Mal. 4:5-6)

Elijah was probably one of the most famous prophets. He was known for calling God's people to turn away from sin and to turn toward the one true God. He would often stand up to evil rulers and never sugar-coated his words.

But Elijah had died many years ago. Did this prophecy mean that he would come back from the dead? It's a confusing and cryptic way to end the Old Testament. Not really how you want to end a book – unless you're planning to write a sequel.

And all this background is really important for us to understand the story Luke wants to tell. Because Luke wants us to know that God is writing the sequel. **God is up to something brand new. God is going to fulfill the promises he made so long ago.**

And the reason this story is so important for you and for me is because there are seasons in our life when it seems like God has been silent and we wonder, Is God listening, Does God care? And in the Christmas story, the answer is a resounding YES!

Here's how the story goes on.

<sup>8</sup> Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

Remember Zechariah was a priest and at this time, there were about 20,000 other priests. So for a priest to be chosen to burn incense was kind of like hitting the jackpot – it was a once in a lifetime opportunity to serve.

<sup>10</sup> And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

<sup>11</sup> Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

<sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.

[And many of you know that this John will become John the Baptist, not to be confused with the disciple John.]

<sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. <sup>16</sup> He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

Why would John have to bring back the people of Israel? Because many of them had wandered away from God. And they had good reason to do so – God hadn't spoken in so long.

<sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

[This is a reference to the prophecy in Malachi we read earlier.]

<sup>18</sup> Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is... well along in years.”

<sup>19</sup> The angel said to him, “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. <sup>20</sup> 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 appointed time.”

I love that phrase – the appointed time. The Greek term for that is *kairos*.

You mean God has had this day marked on his calendar? You mean all this time God has waited this long on purpose? You mean God has watched his people abandon him because it seemed like there was no hope and God has been planning this all along? You mean God hasn't quit paying attention, he hasn't stopped hearing my prayers? You mean God has been waiting to do something?

Yep. At the appointed time.

Wanna know something interesting? What do you think God was up to during those 400 years of silence? What was going on in history at that time? Well, Alexander the Great came to power. He had a huge passion to spread the Greek culture and language throughout the world. Eventually, Greek became the universal language.

Later on Rome came to power. What was one of their greatest legacies they left behind? Their roads. Hence the saying, “all roads lead to Rome.” This was a time when there was unprecedented access to move from one place in the world to another.

After Jesus died and was resurrected and commissioned his church to make disciples of all nations, did you know that the church spread throughout the known world at an explosive rate. Part of this was because Christian missionaries could travel across all the roads that had been built by the Roman Empire. And they could share the gospel and write letters in the Greek language that was understood by almost everyone.

“But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,<sup>5</sup> to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship”. (Galatians 4:4-5)

**Don't mistake God's silence to mean that He's not working behind to scenes to bring about his purposes at the right time. The silence of God isn't the same as the inactivity of God.**

There are no coincidences, there are no delays. God has his appointed time.

Moving along in the story.

<sup>57</sup> When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. <sup>58</sup> Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

<sup>59</sup> On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, <sup>60</sup> but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”

<sup>61</sup> They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

<sup>62</sup> Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. <sup>63</sup> He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.”

Not his name will be John, his name *is* John. God has spoken.

<sup>64</sup> Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. <sup>65</sup> All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. <sup>66</sup> Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord's hand was with him.

And then what comes next is Zechariah's response, his spontaneous outpouring, his worship, his song. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah prophesies:

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

This verse represents the theme of Zechariah’s song: **God has come to deliver His people**. He’s come to redeem them, to save them. He’s ready to act on their behalf; to do what they cannot do on their own. And the rest of the song really elaborates on this theme. Zechariah goes on to talk about how...

**God comes in power to fight for us**

<sup>69</sup> He has raised up a horn<sup>[c]</sup> of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David  
<sup>70</sup> (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),  
<sup>71</sup> salvation from our enemies  
and from the hand of all who hate us—

A horn is an image of war. David was a King who had fought and won many glorious battles, who had defeated many enemies. We’ve talked this year about the reality of spiritual warfare in the world. God’s people have always been engaged in a spiritual battle. For hundreds of years, Zechariah had learned about how God’s people had suffered casualties in this battle or perhaps walked away from the fight.

But now the horn has been blown, God is coming, One who is mighty and powerful is here to fight for us. He will take on the cosmic forces that oppress humanity and bring pain and suffering into the world.

Zechariah goes on to talk about how **God remembers His promises**, (he’s given us this salvation...)

<sup>72</sup> to show mercy to our ancestors  
and to remember his holy covenant,  
<sup>73</sup> the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

It had been two thousand years before Zechariah’s time that God first made that promise to Abraham. And even though the people disobeyed and even though the people rejected God, even though they pursued their own desires and worshipped other idols... Even though they forgot about God and even though they forgot about God’s promises, God did not forget his promises.

In fact, does anyone know what the name Zechariah means? It means “**God remembers**”. Anyone know what Elizabeth’s name means? Elizabeth means “**God’s promises**.”

As a couple, their lives and their faith beautifully illustrated the truth that “God remembers” + “God’s promises.” Zechariah and Elizabeth knew that God remembers God’s promises. Even though for hundreds of years God didn’t seem to be doing anything on the national level – they lived as if God remembers God’s promises. Even though for decades God didn’t seem to be doing anything to give them a child, they still worshipped God as if God remembers God’s promises.

That’s why the writer of Hebrews encourages us to Hold unswervingly to the faith we profess, not because there’s some great strength in us, not because things are necessarily going to get better – but it’s because He who promised is faithful.

God remembers God’s promises.

Zechariah goes on to talk about how **God’s coming transforms us and empowers us for service**

<sup>74</sup> to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,  
and to enable us to serve him without fear  
<sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Notice that God doesn’t rescue us for our own sake. It’s not even just so we can live holy and righteous lives. Zechariah says that he has rescued us so that we can serve him. We’ve been released so that we can be on mission.

God has opened up new opportunities for us. He’s given us gifts and abilities. He’s given us passions. He’s calling us to use these things so that we can serve him in the world and bring about the fullness of his glory. We don’t do this in fear, but we do it in holiness and righteousness.

In the second part of his song, Zechariah addresses his own son who will take up an important role in the coming of the Messiah.

<sup>76</sup> 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,  
<sup>77</sup> to give his people the knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins,  
<sup>78</sup> because of the tender mercy of our God,  
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven  
<sup>79</sup> to shine on those living in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

John the Baptist's mission would be to prepare the people. To preach the message of salvation, to baptize people so that they would be ready when the Messiah came. Where did he learn the faith that pointed others to Jesus in such a powerful way? From his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

In fact, John gets probably the highest compliment Jesus could give when he says that there is no one greater born of women than John the Baptist. What an incredible honour what an amazing legacy for Zechariah and Elizabeth!

Zechariah was a righteous Jew who longed and prayed for Israel. He would have prayed for God to deliver the nation of Israel despite all the odds stacked against it. He would have dreamed about a new era where Israel would come on to the world scene again so that it could be a blessing to the world.

He prayed unceasingly despite what the circumstances looked like, despite the personal pain he and his wife Elizabeth endured, despite what appeared to be the silence of God.

And that first Christmas, God broke the silence and revealed that now was the right time, now was the appointed time. With the coming of Jesus, God honours his promises of long ago to bless his people so that through them all the world would be blessed. That's the message of Christmas!

And when he comprehended this message, Zechariah burst into praise and worship and song. And that song isn't just his song - it's your song and mine. We know what it's like when God seems silent. When God doesn't seem to care. When it looks like good could never come out of our situation.

This Christmas, when we celebrate Jesus, we remember that in Jesus God has come to deliver his people, that God comes in power to fight for us, that God remembers God's promises and that God's coming transforms us and empowers us to serve Him.