Christmas Message 1 (2023)

**His Co-Workers**

*Luke 1:5-25*

*Key Verse:*

*16. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord of their God.*

Merry Christmas. He came to us. The Creator became a creation. It's too unrealistic to believe to be true. However, do you take this for truth? This is a simple but life-changing question. The road ahead of us will be completely different depending on the answer.

Before we get right into today's message, I'd like to discuss Malachi, the last book in the OT briefly. When you think of Malachi, what comes to your mind first? Some of you might think of words about tithe. Of course, the words for the tithe are essential to bear in mind, but Malachi is essentially a prophecy regarding the Great King that will come. Malachi, personally, starts with the most striking introduction in the OT since after Genesis. An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi. "I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' (Mal1:1-2).

They are asking God. How have you loved me? When I was crying for you, where were you? When I suffer, where are you? Don't you think this kind of complaint is very familiar to us? The Lord said to Israel, which was seeking political independence from Persia and secular security. "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. (Mal 3:1~2). Then Malichi foretells Elijah's coming, who will prepare the way for the LORD before Messiah's arrival. "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse." (Mal 4:5~6).

However, after Malachi, the Lord had been silent for 400 years, and the people of Israel had to wait for the Lord's advert for four centuries. Today's story records those who looked forward to seeing Him and prayed for His coming silently in the seemingly hopeless time. May the Lord speak in a gentle whisper to those who seek Your face but lack the strength to do so because of anxiety and worries in their lives and to those still living Malachi’s generation’s lives in the NT.

Verse 5 starts with “In the time of Herod King of Judea.” We have many Herods in the bible. Here, this king is Herod the Great, the founder of the Herodian dynasty. He was famous for being ruthless and cunning. He massacred babies in Bethlehem and its vicinity, afraid of the Messiah’s birth, and his crooked political anxiety caused him to kill even his most beloved wife, three sons, and mother-in-law. He was the Idumean, a descendant of the Edomites, offspring of Essau. The writer indicates how deep that period’s darkness was by starting with Herod the Great's reign. Politically, as said, Israel was a colony of the Roman empire, and religiously, there had been no words from God for 400 years since Malachi. However, just at that darkest age, Israel’s glory was coming.

John’s parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were from Aaron’s descendants; Zechariah was a priest of the Abijah division, and Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. No family line was ever as blessed as Aaron and David’s family. But those blessings were gone. God is starting to restore his promise to Aaron and David through their descendants. His forerunner, John, was from the Aron’s descendants, and Christ came from the David’s, for John's priestly function and power had to pave the way for Christ.

Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. But as Psalms 14:3 and Romans 3:12 say, “There is no one who does good, not even one.” Indeed, in the NT, only faith in Jesus’ redemptive blood can cleanse our sins, and we can be declared righteous before God. Then, what does it mean Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God? Unfortunately, I am not sure. We may refer to other righteous men in the OT, like Noah, Abraham, Rahab, and David. They all had weaknesses and committed many faults, so they could not observe the laws perfectly. But God considered them righteous. In this sense, the Message bible is easier to understand. It says, “They both were righteous (approved) in the sight of God.” Even though their deeds could not be perfect, God approved them as righteous.

They had been childless for a long time, and both became very old to be unable to conceive. As well known, in the OT, infertility was such a disgrace, as Sarah and Hannah said, and regarded as God’s punishment. Although this was a significant misunderstanding of the Bible, this kind of misinterpretation of infertility was generally accepted in Jewish society at that time. According to Jewish traditional law, childlessness was a legitimate reason for divorce. Zechariah and Elizabeth felt dishonor, and discouragement must have been even more significant because they were a priest couple serving God. However, this old couple’s faith in God shined much brighter in these sorrowful and hopeless situations. They never held a grudge against God and silently bore the burden of their lives. As we can infer from verse 13, they prayed earnestly to God for a child and to take the disgrace. However, as Habakkuk 3:17-18 said, they did not doubt God's faithfulness and love even if He did not.

We all know this belief is not as easy as it sounds. Does anyone think you are in a hopeless situation like Zechariah’s childlessness? Does anyone think God is completely turning His face away from you at the dead end of your life and when you are in despair? Like Zechariah, please look at God and trust his goodness even if he does not. Because at that moment of pain and hopelessness, God is watching the deep center of our hearts when we feel abandoned by God. Was our sweet confession of love for my benefit and satisfaction, or was it praise for God, the Creator? God is checking it with His eyes like blazing fire. God is not a mere theory or theology. He is real. God is a living God, and He is alive who talks to us with a gentle whisper.

One evening, my mind was wandering through the valley of deep darkness. My life seemed meaningless, and my heart was filled with darkness. But, I was contemplating death. On my way home from work, a car suddenly appeared and went in front of me for a few minutes. The car’s plate number caught my eye, "J52 RZN." To me, it’s read as "Jesus Risen." I tried to read it differently. But it was "Jesus Risen." My colleague in the passenger seat disagreed, saying “J52” cannot be Jesus, but it was clearly “Jesus Risen.” As I was in deep depression and was tempted by death, God was telling me that Jesus resurrected, destroying death’s power. At that moment, I could stop meditating on death. Then, were all problems resolved after that? No. The situation was the same. I could not feel the joy and peace I prayed for. However, I was able to escape the temptation of death, for I could believe that the God who conquered death was holding my hand with groans. God is not a theory. He is real. I think Zechariah and Elizabeth could live a life of faith despite the sorrow and despair because they firmly held on to God's existence.

Once, when Zechariah’s division was on duty, he was chosen by lot to go into the temple and burn incense. At that time, the number of priests was about 20,000, divided into 24 divisions. So they came to the temple twice a year to serve God. Zechariah won the chance of about 800:1 by lot, but it was God’s calling of Zechariah to the temple.

When Zechariah was burning incense, the angel of the Lord appeared and said to him. “your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will call him John.” There seems to be a disagreement about what exactly Zechariah’s prayer was. Some say his prayer, namely prayer for a child. The others view that the prayer was related to his current position as a priest representing the whole of Israel, in other words, Israel’s redemption and Messiah’s coming. In my opinion, both interpretations are reasonable and make sense.

First, he was a man who had prayed earnestly for the coming of the Messiah, whom God promised to Israel. Even in the dark time when God’s words were hidden, he believed in the living God and his promise, as Simeon and the prophet Anna. While God has not answered for four centuries, he must have prayed more fervently for the Messiah. This is because he believed that God was alive and that God listened to his prayers. Secondly, Zechariah, with his wife, must have prayed earnestly for his child. Then, when they became too old to conceive a child, they seemed to stop praying. In verse 18, Zechariah shows his lack of faith, saying, "How can I be sure of this?"

When we think about John’s name, we can be sure that the angel’s message responded to the above two prayers. The word of John means "God is gracious," and Zechariah means "God remembers," and Elizabeth means "God's Promise." Through the pregnancy of John, God was telling Israel that God never forgets His promise of His coming because God is gracious.

We must acknowledge that the angel said Zechariah's prayer has been heard. KJV also says, “Your prayer is heard.” Some may think it means that Zechariah prayed earnestly in the temple then. Still, I think it would be more appropriate to see that his prayers have been accumulated or stacked up (?) on the altar of heaven for a long time, and at this moment, God responded to his prayers. Zechariah’s prayers for the promise of Israel's salvation and a child were not answered right away, but those prayers had not fallen to the ground but had been still stacked up on the altar of heaven, and God answered in his time when the set time had fully come.

Our prayers do not fall to the ground as long as we remain in God. Even when we forget our prayers, God never abandons our prayers. While the way and timing to achieve differ from our expectations, God will let none of our prayers fall to the ground. We have many prayer topics that have not been answered yet. But those prayers have been stacked on the heaven altar, and God is listening to them. And God will achieve the prayers in his time when the set time has fully come.

The angel said, “He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord.” What is our joy and delight? What kind of success are we yearning for? One of my friends, around the age of early 50, who was leading a successful business, went to bed and the following day could not wake up a month ago. Our earthly life is as transient as the morning dew. May our joy and delight be put on the permanent reward from heaven, to be great before God, and to be God’s witness to the ends of the earth as our Lord Jesus commanded.

Let’s read the 2nd half of verses 15 to 17. “he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 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 prepare a people prepared for the Lord.” The fullness of the Holy Spirit is given according to God’s will for each person and shall be helpful to the church ministry. John's being filled with the Holy Spirit was only to return Israelites to the Lord. If we have received any gift from the Holy Spirit, such as gifts of prayer, tongue, healing, or prophecy, we should not forget that it is only to bring back God’s people to the Lord. The part of John's ministry to turn the father's heart back to his children seems confusing. Here, the father does not mean God because God's heart has never left Israel. So, this verse can be construed as saying that John the Baptist would lead Israel to unity and harmony from split and enmity.

Zechariah showed a lack of faith in God’s words. “How can I be sure of this?” His response was not a simple question when we see verses 18 and 20 combined. While Mary’s question in verse 34, “How will be this?” was about how God would achieve this annunciation, Zechariah’s question was a response to doubt about God’s words. This was probably, I am not sure, but because he quit his prayer for a child at some point and abandoned his hope for a child. But as mentioned above, God never gave up our prayers, and God was answering now.

In response to Zechariah's lack of faith, the angel made him unable to speak until the prophecy was fulfilled. Interestingly, he was rendered silent because of his response of disbelief. Because we are the creation of God, our mouth should be used as an instrument for God’s living message by proclaiming praise and faith, not doubts and complaints. When integrated with verse 62, "When they made signs to his father," Zechariah became unable to speak and hear. This was a disciplinary action against his lack of faith and to provide Zechariah time to meditate on the fulfillment of Malachi's words and God’s plan through Jesus' ministry. After ten months of silence, his mouth, which raised disbelief against God, became a tool to praise the Lord's salvation, as shown in verse 67.

When he returned home, Elizabeth became pregnant, and for five months, she remained in seclusion. Some see this seclusion caused by Elizabeth’s shame of her old-age pregnancy. But in light that she praised in verse 25, “The Lord …… has taken away my disgrace among the people,” it would be more fitting to deem that she wanted to consecrate herself and be purified from the earthly life.

Christianity is called the religion of paradox. In Christ Jesus, disgrace becomes delight, and misfortune is a blessing. During Herod's political persecution and God's silence, the day of His glory was being conceived. The Lord sent John, the forerunner and Jesus' co-worker, to Zechariah and Elizabeth, the old and childless couple. God’s discipline to Zechariah was a time of blessing to meditate on God’s grace deeply, and the mouth of disbelief was used to praise God. However, the genuine and real paradox must happen in our innermost, as Jesus said in Matthew chapter 5, the words of Beatitudes.

Another paradox is that God, who is almighty, wants us to work together with Him. The Bible has numerous stories where God used a human as a co-worker. For example, it was divided when Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. But it was by God’s power, not Moses’. Why did God tell the disciple Ananias to place his hands on Saul so that Saul could see? Why did God send John to prepare the people for Jesus’ ministry? Unfortunately, we do not have a clear answer. However, one thing we know: the Lord has chosen to work through humans, not only the special people written in the Bible but also the ordinary people like us. The way for us to co-work with God is to pray like Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna so that His people can return to the Lord.

The ultimate paradox is our Lord, Jesus. The Creator Himself became a creation as a weak and powerless baby. And Jesus, the innocent, was crucified on behalf of us and died helpless on the cross. But he was resurrected on the third day, proving that he is God's Son. The world can never understand this paradox because, to them, the cross is foolish (1Co1:18). But to us, Jesus’ birth and His cross are the power of God Almighty. I pray we may prepare our hearts for Jesus, be full of this paradoxical joy, and be able to cherish this viewpoint.