

Hope Rekindled

Luke 1:11-17

A survey on men's attitudes about Christmas shopping may provide useful data for women if I have gotten the information out to you on time. Apparently, some men dread holiday shopping so much, they will do anything to get out of it. Rather than venture into crowded malls, 37 percent of men would rather bake cookies. Ladies, you have to be able to use that somehow.

Every year, people lament the fact that the world foists Christmas-time upon the consumer too early. "I'm not ready for Christmas," one person says. "The commercialization is shameful," adds another, or, "Did you see that the mall had Christmas decorations up before Thanksgiving?" We hear it every year, but this year, I've heard it with more intensity than usual. Perhaps, it's because people are saying, "Did you see that the mall had Christmas decorations up before Halloween?" Who knows? Maybe next year, they'll shoot for Labor Day.

Nobody loves Christmas more than me, but even I was finding the unseasonably early encroachment of the retail world upon holy ground bothersome, until it dawned on me. What should I expect? I did some crack research into the world of retail. Do you know why retailers commercialize Christmas? It makes money. Did you know that? Retailers exist to turn profits and they'll use any holiday as a means to that end. You already knew? I'm a bit disappointed.

An unlikely parable came to mind as I was mulling this over. Jesus told a story of a shady servant who had an audit coming up because his master suspected that he had been wasting resources. So, the servant generated all the cash flow he could as quickly as he could by going to different people who were indebted to the master and drastically discounting those accounts receivable. He admitted that he wasn't fit for physical labor and that he was too proud to beg, so when he did get canned, people would owe him favors. He didn't get away with a thing at the audit, but even his master commended him for his savvy. Jesus concluded the story, saying:

"... For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light ..." - Luke 16:8

Retailers will exploit Christmas and anything else they need to in order to turn a profit. The people of this world are true to their objectives, whatever those objectives might be. And, if they end up overdoing Christmas, then, so be it. Moaning won't change anything.

We all know that Christmas is not about gifts, parties or Santa Claus, but it becomes cliché to rant and rave. Besides, it is relatively easy for us to strip away the secular clutter of Christmas that distracts our minds from the tender biblical scenes of angels, shepherds and magi from the east. We understandably get upset over efforts to remove the images from the secular marketplace, but my question is this: "Can we become so comfortable and unchallenged by those biblical images of Christmas that we are unable to see beyond the pastoral scenery?" How long has it been since you found yourself truly and profoundly gripped by the awe of God's gift to us at Christmas - Incarnation?

God became a man. If I need shepherds, magi, angels and cooler weather to remind me to cherish the Incarnation of God in the Person of Jesus, then, there is something remiss in my understanding of Christmas. Perhaps, we do not start the celebration of Christmas early enough. Retailers and other "people of this world" shrewdly pull out all stops to make money and to achieve their secular objectives.

What is our objective as the people of light, and what has Christmas to do with those objectives? In the 1640s, some English and Scottish theologians produced a summary of faith that began with this premise: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." Whether or not you come from that particular church tradition," most believers find that stated objective agreeable. Of course, the only potentiality we have for enjoying God is in Jesus, Who made the Father known to us and Who provided a way of being restored us to His fellowship

Without Incarnation, there is no reconciliation to God. There is only His holiness and our sinfulness. There is neither enjoyment of God nor peace with Him, but only estrangement and judgment. Without Incarnation, even the cross and the Resurrection are stripped of their full meaning.

The entire Old Testament set the stage for Christmas. In fact, whether you noticed it or not, I have been hinting at Christmas for the past three weeks. I could have started in January with the first clue that Christmas was coming when God spoke to the serpent that enticed Eve to sin:

¹⁵And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel." - Genesis 3:15

This was God's first announcement that Christmas was on the way, but I have limited myself to a few messages with a common theme. Anytime God appeared to men, the words, "Do not be afraid," were in order, for sinful humans are naturally terrified by the presence of the holy. But, in each of the four instances we have explored, there was also some fear or an element of doubt that the promises of God, long hoped for by His people, were somehow going to fail.

Abraham was ready to leave everything to a servant just so he would have someone that at least looked like an heir. God said, "Do not be afraid, Abraham. You will have a son of your own." Isaac was unnerved by hostile neighbors who would never let him truly possess the land. God said, "Do not be afraid, Isaac. Your children will possess it." Jacob was concerned that moving his family to Egypt to escape a famine might undermine the promise of a nation. God said, "Do not be afraid, Jacob. I'm still on top of things." Finally, the children of Israel, newly freed from slavery in Egypt, were terrified as they were trapped between the Red Sea and the chariots of Pharaoh. Through Moses, God said, "Do not be afraid. Be still and watch Me deliver you."

Israel would become a world power under David and Solomon, but it divided shortly thereafter. Both nations declined morally. The ten northern tribes ceased to exist as an ethnically pure race. God kept a remnant of the southern nation, called Judah, intact during seventy years of captivity in Babylon. After that remnant returned and reestablished Judah, the nation never recaptured its former glory. Eventually, Judah existed as an occupied nation, part of the vast Roman Empire.

Around 1500 years had passed since God delivered His people through the Red Sea. It had been 400 years since the last prophet spoke. A few faithful people in the land longed for a deliverer from God of whom the ancient prophets had spoken. Hope in that promise was still alive, but it barely flickered. It was time for God to once again speak comfort to His people. The ancient story of Christmas continues as we are now introduced to a faithful old priest named Zechariah to whom Gabriel, an angel of God, appears and speaks the words, "Do not be afraid ..."

I. The Answer to a Prayer (11–13)

¹¹Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³But 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 give him the name John ..."

A. The Whole Scene Has an Old Testament Feel

After a brief introduction, Luke begins his narrative by telling us that Herod was the king of Judea, only Herod was not Jewish. He was Idumean, which means he was descended from Esau, the older brother of Jacob. This galled the faithful Jew, for it was as if God's blessing of Jacob over Esau had been reversed. Of course, Herod the Great ruled only as a representative of Rome. He claimed the title "king of the Jews" whenever he promoted one of his big building projects, but those were always for the glory of Herod and of Rome, never for the glory of the Jews. Herod was simply a reminder of the painful truth that the glory had long ago departed from Israel.

Zechariah was a priest. His wife Elizabeth also traced her lineage to Aaron, the first high priest. Like Sarah of old, Elizabeth was barren beyond normal child-bearing years. Zechariah and Elizabeth were considered righteous, at least as righteous as faithfully observing the old rituals of the Law could make them. A number of prayerful folk outside the temple were waiting for the old priest to come out and pronounce a blessing on them. Historians call these people of simple faith "the quiet of the land." They were simply waiting for God's *messiah* to console the nation.

The angel appeared to Zechariah on what was likely a once-in-a-lifetime occasion for any priest. The 20,000 priests in Judea were far too many for all of them to hang around the temple all the time, so they were divided into twenty-four orders. An order of priests only served at the temple eight days every six months as well as during the great festivals. Most priests did not even live in Jerusalem. The individual tasks were assigned by lot. Zechariah was chosen to burn incense in the holy place just outside the most holy place. Many priests never got a chance to burn incense. Luke has gone to great pains to depict this first scene in his story of Jesus at Jerusalem's temple.

B. What Prayer Did God Answer?

The appropriate prayer of a priest on the occasion of burning incense was for the nation and for the coming of *messiah*. Zechariah may not have uttered a prayer for a son in years. He was surely reconciled to the fact that Elizabeth would never bear a child. Still, at this spiritually-piqued moment, perhaps, he could not help but to ask one more time. Of course, a prayer does not have to be recent for God to answer it. In any event, when the angel announced the birth of a child in answer to his prayer, was he speaking of a prayer for the nation or of a prayer for a son?

God has an uncanny knack of killing multiple birds with a single stone. Israel's redemption was at hand, but Zechariah's name meant "remembered of God," and God also remembered his old prayers. It is similarly fitting that the name John means "grace of *JEHOVAH*." The conception of a child to aged parents was a powerful statement of God's grace. Barrenness carried a social stigma among the Jews. Elizabeth interpreted her pregnancy as God having "taken away my disgrace among the people" (Luke 1:25). Of course, the name, "grace of *JEHOVAH*," also described the historical dispensation at hand that John was about to introduce.

II. The Arrival of a Prophet (14–17)

A. He Will Be Great in the Sight of the Lord verses 14, 15a

“... ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord ...”

Not only would the birth of this child named John bring joy to a previously barren older couple, but that joy would extend beyond their family and throughout the land. This is the child, who of course would grow up to become John the Baptist, the forerunner whose life’s ministry was to announce the near arrival of *messiah*’s kingdom and to prepare the hearts of the people of Israel with a message of repentance so that they might be prepared for the coming of the King Himself.

The phrase, “he will be great in the sight of the Lord” would be immediately reminiscent of the prophets and judges of old:

Zacharias would quickly catch the angel’s thoughts. His son was not to be the Messiah of the people’s hope, but was to be like one of those great loved ones of God, of whom the women of Israel sang on their solemn feast days – one like Samson, only purer, or Samuel, or the greater Elijah. Could all this deep joy be true? - H.D.M. Spence

John the Baptist would come and go from the wilderness proclaiming a message of repentance that would resonate to those in Israel who were longing for the dawning of a new age. He was courageous. He had a sense of social justice. What wasn’t to like? He took on self-righteous Pharisees. He took on dishonest tax-collectors. He took on soldiers who bullied people as a way of extorting money from them. He condemned the immorality of one of Herod’s sons. That would eventually cost John his head. Jesus commended John highly to His own disciples:

²⁴... Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ²⁵If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. ²⁶But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷This is the one about whom it is written:

“~I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.”

²⁸I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” - Luke 7:24-28

B. He Will Be Holy to God from Birth verse 15b

“... He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.”

John was called to simple, non-indulgent living. He was never to drink, lest there be any charge against him that some other spirits besides the Holy variety was moving him along. When the Apostles first preached the Gospel on Pentecost, their passion was cynically miscast as drunkenness. John would live in the wilderness, clothed in simple attire and sustained by wilderness foods. He was untouched by the evils of the culture and independent of the world’s enticements. This was his calling from birth. We do not share John’s unique prophetic office in that unique place in time, but our regard for holiness and for a contented simplicity of life would still greatly enhance our credibility as servants working to bring God’s kingdom into our world.

C. He Will Ready the Way for the Christ verses 16, 17

¹⁶Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

The heart of a spiritually-barren nation no longer beat for God as did the hearts of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and Elijah. It is hard to imagine what generational divides might have existed when John stepped onto the stage. I picture many older people among the quiet of the land, longing for the consolation of Israel and with it, a new age of blessing and spirituality. I picture a middle-aged generation, jaded by the Roman presence and the overall harshness of life. They were more about surviving and eking out a living than they were about pining over the past or a lost culture. There may have been a younger generation, restless and attracted to counter-cultural characters like John or even open to violence as a means of shaking up the status quo.

Whatever the generational divides, Israel would never be ready to meet *Messiah* until there were some who were not just worked up over their own expectations of what *Messiah* ought to be and ought to do, but God-centered enough to truly receive Him. Only heartfelt repentance could prepare them to meet Jesus. A proud heart can never admit the need to be forgiven. Only repentance can ever cause restless people to find peace and beauty in God's workings.

Spiritual restlessness is usually not remedied by a pursuit of newness, adventure, more inspirational worship and more relevant teaching. Those are typically smokescreens. Restlessness is most often remedied through the process of deeper repentance and restoration.

Four centuries had passed since the last prophet had spoken. The last thing Malachi had said was that Elijah was returning to introduce either a blessing of restoration to Israel or a curse. When Jesus came, some received the Kingdom. Many chose the curse. But, can you imagine Zechariah's exhilaration as Gabriel announced that his own son, John, would be that Elijah character who would usher in the age of *Messiah*? This could only mean that prophecy was still unfolding and that God's ancient promises were still valid.

Ever try to live by faith through a season of spiritual barrenness? That was Zechariah's experience. But, even those "quiet of the land," who lived during that 400-year period when God did not speak, had to cry out from time to time, "Have You forgotten us, Lord?" They would hardly have been the first or the last of God's people to struggle with such doubts. Still, when Gabriel appeared to this old priest in the temple, saying, "Do not be afraid," the answer to all such questions became a resounding "No." God had not forgotten His promises. He still has not forgotten. That's a lot to chew on as we wrestle with our own doubts and our own impatience with God's timing. Nothing has changed. God's promises still calm our fears as nothing else can.