

# Charades & Silence

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## SPEAKERS

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5 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. 6 Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years. 8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. 11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 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 give him the name John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 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 from birth. 16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 And 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." 18 Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." 19 The angel answered, "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. 20 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 proper time." I'm sure that all of you know what the game charades is. Kind of a party game where you have to guess either phrase or something by someone just doing

motions or actions. No speaking at all. Well, as you get to the Gospel of Luke, it opens with prophecy about two births, the birth of John the Baptist and the birth of Jesus Christ. But in one of them, it's going to involve a priest who ends up being relegated to charades and silence, not as a means of entertainment, but actually as a means of rebuke and assigned to himself and others. So I want you to turn to the Gospel of Luke Luke chapter one. And I mentioned earlier that our theme for Advent overall is Repeat the sounding joy, partly based on the hymn Joy to the World which is celebrating its 300th anniversary in 2019. But we're going to look at this from the perspective that on this first Sunday, that Advent calls for preparation, the thought of coming in the coming of Christ involves preparation, but a Luke one will look at this from two perspectives first, The preparation of the world. And then secondly, the preparation of God's servants. So let's begin with verse five. And look at this thought of the preparation of the world wouldn't needed to take place within God's sovereign plan of redemption, involving the world and in particular, the Roman Empire. So verse five simply begins with in the time of Herod the king of Judea, there was a priest named Zachariah. Now, it doesn't sound like phenomenal opening words. It's not like the novel, you know, in the best of time, it was the best of times was the worst of times, kind of, you know, what a line to begin with. This almost sounds quite plain Matter of fact. And yet, Luke, by giving us these details, is establishing the credibility of all it's going to follow in the Gospel of Luke. So what does that The importance of saying this was the time or the days of Herod, the king of Judea. Well, I think it points to the preparation of the world. In other words, you want to read that line carefully heard his king. But you know what, everybody around him knows, especially the people of Israel, they know. He's not a he's not a king in the line of David. In fact, Herod is an Edomite. He's a descendant of Esau. So knowing Jewish history, you would know this is not the Davidic king. He in fact, is a puppet King, put there by Rome to help monitor and keep hopefully things very peaceful in Judea. So the setting is you have a king but he's not a king. He's not the ultimate King, that the Old Testament keeps promising will come. Also, we know that during this timeframe, it's in the midst of the Pax Romana, which means Roman peace. So there's a period in Roman history in the Roman Empire where for 200 years, there is a peace and stability that Rome establishes generally throughout its empire. It's a time in which Rome rises to being the capital of the Western world in terms of culturally, architecturally, all of the things we tend sometimes positively to equate with the Roman Empire. But in the midst of that, there's also a crack in the foundation within the Roman Empire. And that is as as excelling on one side. It is falling apart, morally, sexually, and politically. So There's political division in the midst of the Pax Romana. There's escalating sexual perversion that Roman historians speak of quite openly. And Matter of fact, there's division within the classes, that the wealthy are becoming wealthier and the poor are becoming more and more destitute. And there's great corruption in the priesthood. In other words, people would know that their high priest is not there because of his godliness, but because he bought the position. So you have all of these elements that speak of why, why this time in history, that God will intervene and bring his son into the world. We have a world that on one side looks glorious, but inwardly is full of decay, and corruption. And you start realize some of this description sounds an awful lot like our world, the world that we live in. This is all a part of the

preparation of the world, according to God's sovereign plan, but then go down to verses eight and nine. And this information about Zachariah being a priest at that time, is explained a little bit more when it says once when Zacharias division was on duty, and he was serving as priests before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord, and to burn incense. Now we have a statement about just the general structure of the priesthood. During this particular time in Jewish history, you've got 24 divisions of priests. All those priests will basically have two weeks or they will serve and not all will get to serve Go into the holy place, only one is going to get to go into the Most Holy Place one time a year. But out of those 24 divisions, you have a limited amount of time and opportunity, or each priest will serve in a unique way. According to historians at this time in the first century, there were about 18,000 priests in Jerusalem. So where do you suddenly realize is this lot falling to Zachariah is not by chance or by fate. You want to read that phrase the casting of lots in its Old Testament perspective, it was a means by which God often directed and made known His will. We might think of it sort of, you know, you draw straws. You know, you pick one of you gets a different color ball. That was it means that God said this is how I will direct you. So the fact that Zachariah finds that He is the one who not only will be on duty during this time, but he's also going to be the one priest, who will take the offering into the holy place and pray before God on behalf of the people. In other words, this is a opportunity of a lifetime. This will only come once in his life. This is better than winning the lottery, if your priest so all of these details fall into place of the preparation of the big picture, that although there's human parts that are moving in this, it's ultimately God's hand, who's directing and bringing each piece into place. But then you notice also in Luke chapter one, verse 10, that during this time of which the priests would go into the holy place, you have, the worshippers are gathered together and they're going to be praying Outside as the priests goes in, and then you look further at verses 21 and 22. When Zachariah goes in, and does not come out as promptly as most priests would. It tells us the people were waiting for Zachariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak. So they realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them, but remained unable to speak. In other words, in the preparing of the scene, you already have God building in witnesses, people who are going to verify the details of what actually happened. When Zachariah went in and then came out. It was unable verbally to give testimony. In fact, there is Jewish instruction by rabbis that when the priests would go into this part To the temple to say his prayers, they were to be prompt and short for fear of creating anxiety in the people. If he did not come out quickly to see how God prepares this stage, which is confirmed by Paul, when he's writing in Galatians, four, he says that in the fullness of time, God sent His Son to be born of a woman under the law, in the fullness of time at the precise time. And so I had you look at in verse one when it says, In the time of Herod, and then if you also look at the end of verse 20, where Gabriel speaks of this promise, he says, which will come true at their proper time, both those are the same word, but there's two different words you can use in the original languages for time One is a very broad term a general term. The other one is very specific. It refers to a decisive moment, like the perfect time. It is that second meaning that is used here in both these words, at the precise time, at the exact time. And

so we see God preparing the world for the coming of His Son, Jesus Christ. But I said there's a second aspect we also need to look at in this narrative, and that is the preparation of God's servant. The world is prepared, all the pieces are in place. One now goes on, on a much deeper level here in the preparation of God's servant. And so you notice that verses five through seven, Luke does not want us to lose sight. That the location of all this happens where the temple the place of worship. And I was we look at this we obviously are confronted first with the preparation of God's servants in terms of the parents of John the Baptist, Zachariah and Elizabeth. And Luke tells us something about their character, which evidence is that God's favor is on his favor is not on them because they are righteous, they are righteous and blameless because God's favor is on them. And so look closely with me at verses five through seven. We're told about this elderly couple. Notice, first of all, in verse five, they both belong to a priestly line. That in terms of genealogy of establishing your connections, they both belong to a priestly line. They can both be traced back Different ways to Aaron, this this is very important detail that Luke wants us to know. Remember in the opening prologue of Luke verses one through four, Luke says I'm writing as both a historian. I want to make sure all the facts are correct. And I'm also writing so you know how to defend and explain your faith. So every detail here is vitally important. So we know that they're both can be traced back as being descendants of Aaron. Notice in verse six, it speaks to the fact that they were upright or righteous in the sight of God, and their obedience to His word was blameless. Speaking of their spiritual integrity, their their faithfulness, and we can assume they had been faithful for many, many years. Given the fact as it will tell us they've are both full of years beyond the age of having children well beyond the age. Notice in verse seven, a little caveat is added to us. They didn't have what we might say, a perfect life. They weren't living the American dream, because there's something here that's on earth for us and verse seven, but they had no children. Because Elizabeth was barren and they were both well, along in years. You want to think about what does that mean in a Jewish context? Here is this godly couple. He's a priest. She's connected to a lineage of priests, but no children. First Century Judaism would look at that and say there's there's some kind of judgment. Something that this is the reason why God has prevented her him from having children. In other words, this would be something that would tend to be looked down upon. They have borne this burden for many, many years. Not the perfect couple, but they're godly couple. And then you notice what happens in verse 13. Knowing that background about Zachariah, his time and responsibility comes up, he goes in to perform the sacrifice. While he's doing that, verse 13. It says, but the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zachariah, your prayer has been heard. Why is that so important? Your prayer has been heard. Well, that sounds exciting. But it causes you to think about what prayer are we talking about? immediately it says your wife Elizabeth will be with child So it's possible that maybe when he was in again, for this time he prayed about that. The only thing that would be somewhat unusual is as a priest, his primary function would be going into pray for the redemption of Israel. And I think you could postulate here that maybe what has happened is two prayers have been answered. But at that moment, he had not been praying for sun. In fact, the text seems to imply this was a prayer that maybe many years ago was kind of hung up as that's not going to happen. In other

words, they had prayed about it for many, many years. But now as he was fulfilling his priestly functions, he was praying for the redemption of Israel, for the Messiah to come. For that one who Malika said was going to come to prepare the way For the Messiah, that those things would fall into place. In other words, the significance that should strike us here is that Zachariah heard for the first time out of anyone in Israel's history for 400 years, God speaking to a prophet to priests, there was this absence of that, where the book of Malika ends where the people are not listening. And God is in a sense is going to go to them so you don't want to listen to my work, then I won't speak to you. I won't raise up a profit. So for the first time, this elderly priest hears the words of Gabriel, saying your prayer has been answered. preparation that needed to take place first, and God's servant, Zachariah and Elizabeth. Were those long years of not having a child, a part of God's preparation, a part of God's perfect plan, although it was difficult for them. And from an earthly perspective, they had kind of come to the realization physically, emotionally and spiritually. It's just not going to happen. Haven't you ever been there before in your own life? God says one thing. You don't see it happening. You kind of reach a point. I guess that's just the way it's going to be. But God also was preparing not just the parents of John the baptist, but you have a description here of this one whom they will carry that Elizabeth will carry. There's a process where God's preparing them Child already. And so look at verses 13 through 17. You have quite a description of the forerunner of Jesus Christ, John the baptist. Notice in the description at the end of verse 13. God picks his name. This is not common practice. The father would pick the name of the son. And in fact, this surprises the crowds later when John is born, they're all expecting, you know, we're going to see Zachariah Jr. Are we going to see some other Old Testament name? And he blurts out, John. That's where we're calling him, because that's what God has named him. So think of the process here, even John's name, which means God is gracious, was not chosen by his parents. He was chosen by God. Then you look a little further in the description, his birth, who's going to be the source of joy to many. This will be part of the fulfillment of God's promise and Molokai, one who will come before the Messiah. You also have mentioned that he's going to be great in the sight of God. Luke is very careful as he opens his gospel with these prophecy of two births, and then tells you about both births, that he clearly distinguishes, although John the baptist way great in the sight of God, Jesus exceeds him because Jesus is the Son of God. JOHN will come to prepare the way but he is not the way Jesus Christ the Messiah, is the way but you see God's hand in preparing this one who will come to announce the coming of Jesus Christ. I mentioned some of his vows there. He will be In a similar way, maybe like a nazzer right now in the Old Testament, which would speak of one's complete dedication unto God. He'll also be uniquely filled with the spirit from birth, which you'll see later on in Luke's gospel, the reaction that when Mary shows up to see Elizabeth the reaction within Elizabeth's womb, or John the baptist and knowing he's in the presence of the one who will carry the Messiah, he's going to go out in the spirit and power of alijah you would not need to explain to someone who is Jewish, the significance of that phrase. There's a larger challenge of people to reform and turn to God, in the midst of great idolatry and sinfulness. John the baptist, similar setting, it's going to come in and then you have the reference. He's going To turn the hearts of others to God. That's a unique Old Testament

phrase for what a prophet does. He preaches repentance. He tells people you need to turn away from sin, and you need to turn to God. This is what John the Baptist is being prepared for, by the Spirit of God, even before he enters this world. Now, at this point, it seems like all the preparations are in place. The circumstances in the world, in the world stage is all in place. You have Zachariah and Elizabeth there in place. You have John the Baptist who's going to be born soon, he's in place. But there's one other work that needs to still be done. And it's in the work within the realm of the heart of Zachariah. This godly man stillness reads his own heart prepared for this. And so you see something that catches us off guard and verse 18. Zachariah asked the angel, how can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife as well along in yours. What does Zachariah really saying here? And how is this different from Mary's response? When the angel Gabriel goes to her? And she says, How can this be? I don't know, man. there clearly is a big difference. Mary's response is not met by any kind of chastisement or rebuke. Because I think what you see in Mary's response is she's just saying, how is this going to happen? Whereas Zachariah is saying, Can you do this? Can this really happen? And notice, there's no debate On the second part, I'm an old man and my wife is beyond yours. There's the angel Gabriel doesn't respond, say, well, you got to understand, you know, the, the, the 75 is now the new 30. No, he is old, and he is beyond yours. And Elizabeth is old, and she's behind yours. The problem is Zachariah miss something in his heart, as godly as he is. There's an element of unbelief and lack of trust here and God's promise. How could a priest not make the connection between God's word and God's promise here? Because we read what he said, that comes off the lips of Abraham. He should have known what did God do with Abraham Think of other miraculous births. Isaac, Samson, Samuel. Zachariah knew those stories. But sadly like some of us, there was a disconnect in saying you know what that tells me what God promises he will always fulfill. You can even add to that Zachariah would have known the last time the angel Gabriel appears is the one time in the Old Testament. We appears to Daniel. Daniel living in the Babylonian captivity has little to rejoice in outwardly. The angel Gabriel appears and explains them a vision about the future through Zachariah and a much better setting and stage and yet he does not connect that this message will happen, just as God's prophecy explained to Daniel will come true in every way as a means of both gentle rebuke, but also, oddly enough is assigned to Zachariah and all those people worshipers waiting for him to come out of the temple. He will not be able to speak nor the text seems imply not only will he not be able to speak, he will not be able to hear until the birth of this child in that vacuum of silence. What do you think will be going through Zacharias mind and heart over those months? I think his heart was being prepared. I believe he constantly was going over. Why did I question this big Going back to the Old Testament reading those accounts again, saying I see it now. I can't wait, that when I can speak of this and tell others about the answer to God's promise made long ago. adventism all about preparation calls us to have our hearts prepared to meet God in a new way to connect again, if God has promised something, he will fulfill it in his timing, not ours. And therefore, the first Sunday of Advent is also the perfect occasion for coming before the Lord and the Lord's Supper. It's meant to be a time of preparation to examine your heart to make sure that the reality of who Christ is isn't just stories and narratives that you can repeat By memory, but they're true events

that continue to shape and affect your life and my life. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father how we do need our hearts continually softened by your Holy Spirit. But we have many times that we disconnect the Word of God, from the actions and attitudes in our lives. The Lord made this powerful reminder from the opening words of the Gospel of Luke, challenge us as we come to the Lord's Supper, to examine ourselves, by your grace, and by your mercy. May you cause us to be greater and holiness Reflecting Christ, more humble in our response to Christ and Lord, more joyful in what is ours in Christ. We pray these things in Jesus name Amen