

*Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / December 15, 2019 / Pastor Jeff Harrison*  
Walking to Bethlehem Series  
**What We See (Luke 1)**

### **Glasses story shows we sometimes have poor sight**

Thank you Worship Team and Pam and the kids for getting us in the Christmas spirit!

So back in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I took Spanish with Senora Howe. Most of us 8<sup>th</sup> graders, me included, weren't about classes that required any outside study. So we might have submitted a complaint or two, very respectfully of course, to Senora Howe about the class workload.

This was not Senora Howe's first rodeo, so she had responses ready. Her first was the phrase "en Español", requiring us to share our complaint in Spanish. Which as unmotivated first year students, we almost always struggled to do.

But on the small chance we successfully complained "en Español", she was ready. She'd reply with her favorite Spanish word, "pobrecito". It translates to "poor baby." It can be said sincerely, but in Senora Howe's case, it was not.

Another thing Senora Howe liked was teaching with an overhead projector. So young people know what I'm talking about, here's a picture. I found I had to move to a seat in the front row of class to read from the projector, and even then, I was squinting my eyes trying to make out the words. Thought I didn't want to admit it (since I thought they would make me even less cool), it was time for glasses. My eyes no longer saw what they needed to see.

And as we can have poor physical eyesight, so we can also have poor spiritual sight. Sometimes, spiritually speaking, we don't see everything that we need to see. Sometimes we only see what's happening on the human level, failing to also see that God is at work.

### **Relevance: what we see makes a big impact**

We all can struggle at times with poor spiritual sight, especially when things are hard. And Christmas can be filled with hard things. Like feelings of overwhelm as there's way too much to do, like longing for family relationships that aren't so stressful, or grieving as you get out the decorations and find a loved one's stocking who has passed away.

Especially when things are hard, we need help with what we see. If we only see our broken circumstances, and don't also look with eyes of faith, then doubt, anxiety, and despair

can rush in. Poor spiritual sight can harm our mental health, relationships, and walks with God. So let's ask for God's help with what we see as we look to His Word...

## **Orienting to God's Word**

Today we're getting help with what we see from Luke chapter 1. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the Gospel of Luke. If not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. And if you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

As you're opening to Luke chapter 1, I'll share some background. Here at the beginning of Luke's account, the nation of Israel, God's people, are struggling. It's been about 400 years since they've heard from God, and the Romans have occupied them and are ruling over them. 400 years is about the time from today to back when the Pilgrims set sail. That's a really long time to try to keep a good perspective on things. And not only are there national challenges, the Israelites in Luke 1 also carry personal pain. They, like us, desperately need good spiritual sight.

## **What the biblical characters see spiritually**

*Zechariah has limited vision that leads to dangerous doubt (5-25)*

So let's learn from their story, starting in verse 5 of Luke chapter 1. **(5-6)**

<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 these verses we learn that Zechariah and Elizabeth are very respectable: a moral, godly couple from moral, godly families. But in verse 7, we begin to empathize with this couple as we learn of the deep pain they carry. **(7)**

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

This godly, gray haired couple carries the deep pain of decades of infertility and unanswered prayers. They were like their time's Abraham and Sarah, a godly couple from the Old Testament who also struggled with decades of infertility before finally having a miracle child in old age.

Yet despite Elizabeth and Zechariah's personal pain, and the nation's pain, Zechariah keeps faithfully as a priest. As so many gray-haired folks here at Northwest keep on faithfully serving the Lord while carrying great pain, Lord bless you.

Now back then, the priests like Zechariah took turns serving at God's temple in Jerusalem. And once, as Zechariah serves, he gets a very special assignment. Verse 8: **(8-10)**

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

Each day at the temple, the priests made a morning and evening sacrifice. And one of the priests was chosen by lot, which is kind of like drawing straws to decide something. The priest chosen got to go in the temple and offer incense to God, the incense a symbol of their prayers going up to God.

Since there were thousands of priests, a priest could only have the honor of offering the incense once.<sup>1</sup> And Zechariah, nearing his career's end, finally gets his once in a lifetime chance to offer the incense. At this amazing moment for Zechariah, an amazing thing happens in verse 11. **(11-17)**

<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. <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. <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."

The angel tells Zechariah that God is finally answering his prayers. Not only is God finally providing Zechariah a child, but God has an amazing plan for that child that will bless the

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<sup>1</sup> Liefeld & Pao, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Luke-Acts (Revised Edition)*, in Luke 1 section. The ancient *Letter of Aristeas* says there were 18,000 priests.

whole nation. God's people have waited 400 long years for a word from God, and Zechariah's boy John will be that prophet, and will even prepare the way for Jesus Himself!

Let's see this godly priest's response to this amazing news in verse 18. **(18)**

<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."

Now Zechariah is currently serving as God's priest, in God's temple, getting his once in a lifetime chance to offer incense to God at God's altar, and he's talking to an angel. And that angel is telling him, "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.", which, sounds an awful lot like when God told Abraham, "your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac."

Yet even in that divine, faith-filled environment, Zechariah's limited spiritual vision, his lack of faith, leads to doubting God's promises. Here we see the danger of only seeing what's happening on the human level, and how it can lead to doubting God's promises. If that's where you're at this morning, it's normal, Zechariah is a very godly guy and he's in that place, so it's nothing to feel guilty about. God bless you for still coming and engaging today.

But if your spiritual vision is limited, and you've got doubts, you need to seek help. Now's not the time to tell yourself that you're too busy to reach out to a mature believer who could listen and pray with you and help you process your doubt. What you're dealing with is too important to not address, you're in a place of danger.

Limited spiritual vision that lacks faith is so dangerous that Gabriel has a strong response to it in verse 19, a severe mercy. **(19-20)**

<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."

Gabriel is like, "I'm in God's inner circle, and God Himself sent me to tell you this good news. Yet you're still asking for a sign in doubt; so your sign is you won't speak a word until my words come true."

While all this is happening, the people praying outside at the temple are beginning to worry about what's happened to Zechariah. Verse 21: **(21-25)**

<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. <sup>22</sup> When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. <sup>23</sup> When his time of service was completed, he returned home. <sup>24</sup> After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. <sup>25</sup> “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

After offering incense, the priest normally gave the people praying outside a blessing. I bet some of the people who journeyed to the temple to pray were there because their lives were broken and they needed God to break through. And inside the temple Zechariah just received the greatest news of God breaking through, but because of Zechariah’s lack of faith, he can’t tell the people the good news they needed to hear.

This is why it’s important to address our limited spiritual vision not only for us, but for the people around us. That me not trying to get help for a faith struggle is not only a personal issue between me and God, it’s also a communal issue that impacts the people around me. People dealing with their own faith struggles who need my help, and your help, as Zechariah’s wife Elizabeth will soon help a young woman we meet in verse 26. **(26-27)**

*Mary and Elizabeth see with faith that leads to blessing (26-55)*

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.

Here we meet Mary, a girl pledged to be married, which is like a more serious version of being engaged, during which the couple was still not supposed to sleep together. And Mary receives a huge surprise in verse 28, which says: **(28-29)**

<sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” <sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

Mary, like Zechariah before, is troubled by mighty Gabriel, even though he just called Mary “highly favored.” So Gabriel reassures Mary more in verse 30, which says: **(30-33)**

<sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and


will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,<sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

Talk about a bombshell. Gabriel surprises this impoverished young woman from a backwater town with the news that she has been chosen to be the mother of the Son of God.

Verse 34: **(34)**

<sup>34</sup> "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

Unlike Zechariah, Mary does not demand a sign. Rather, she just tries to understand how in the world a virgin could bear God's Son. So Gabriel clears all that just right up in verse 35.

 **(35-38)**

<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail." <sup>38</sup> "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Unlike Zechariah, Mary doesn't focus on just the human possibilities, she sees with eyes of faith, trusting Gabriel's message and submitting herself to God's plan. Some see Mary as a second Eve, whose amazing faith and obedience plays a role in reversing Eve's disobedience. And Mary shows us that you don't need the advantages of Zechariah, like walking with God for decades and formal Bible education, to see with eyes of faith.

And Mary will need to keep seeing with faith because she's taken on something both incredible and incredibly challenging. Mary is about to be pregnant, before married, in an ancient small town with a very traditional culture. Seeing things only from a human level, the likely outcome is for her parents and Joseph to not believe her seemingly unbelievable story, I mean just imagine how that conversation might go. And then for Mary to be kicked out of Joseph's house in shame as the whole town gossips about her cheating and unplanned pregnancy, putting Mary and her baby at risk.

And on top of all that, when we discussed Luke 1 in seminary, the professor noted that a girl back then was typically pledged to be married at around the age of today's 8<sup>th</sup> grader. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade I was just worried about not looking cool with my new glasses.

So young Mary is going to need eyes of faith, and help. Interestingly, in verse 36, Gabriel mentioned Elizabeth. Perhaps Gabriel mentioned Elizabeth not only to inspire Mary's faith in God's power, but to suggest that Mary visit Elizabeth. Verse 39: **(39-40)**

<sup>39</sup> At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, <sup>40</sup> where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

At this point Elizabeth is six months pregnant with her miracle baby John. But not everything is perfect. Zechariah hasn't spoken in months, and given how Luke describes the couple, I don't think their marriage was the kind where Elizabeth enjoyed Zechariah's silence. And Elizabeth is also dealing with all the physical and hormonal challenges that come with pregnancy as an elderly woman.

But, as verse 25 said, Elizabeth has been reflecting on God's favor towards her, seeing with eyes of faith, and it shows in verse 41. **(41-45)**

<sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" <sup>43</sup> But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Godly Elizabeth, filled with God's Spirit, cries aloud in these verses with praise that encourages Mary to trust in God's promises. When we're struggling to see our circumstances with eyes of faith, we can be tempted to think that no one understands. But if God can provide Mary, in her extremely unique circumstances, with someone who understands, He can provide you with someone who can help you see with faith.

And as Mary is impacted by Elizabeth, Mary joins her in praising God. Mary is not denying the reality of her challenges, but she is also seeing God's amazing work. And so Mary beautifully praises God in verses 46 through 55. I like how Dr. Craig Barnes expresses Elizabeth and Mary's relationship.

"As the Bible constantly illustrates, God's timing usually takes us by surprise. Sometimes, as with Elizabeth, God moves too slowly. Sometimes, as with Mary, he moves too quickly. Like Elizabeth, some of you in church today have been praying for a long time for something to happen. You think now that it may never happen. Obviously you can't make it

happen, because if you could have, you would have. Clearly, you are not in control. Like Mary, others of you find that your lives are all disheveled this year. God has conceived something in your life that you didn't ask for. It doesn't make any sense. You are frightened, confused, and, clearly, you are not in control either.

When we come together in worship we are all confessing that, in spite of looking so different, at least we share a common limitation of not being in control of our lives. We have entered God's house. It is fascinating that, according to Luke's gospel, after Mary discovered that she would give birth to the Messiah the first person she went to, with haste, was not Joseph or her parents but her relative Elizabeth whose life was also clearly out of control. This means that the very first church service, the first community of believers brought together by the presence of Christ, were two pregnant women."<sup>2</sup>

Two pregnant women who saw with faith, Mary's faith encouraged by the spiritual sight of Elizabeth. Encouraged in her faith, Mary now heads home in verse 56. **(56-62)**

*Zechariah now sees with faith that leads to Spirit filled praise (56-79)*

<sup>56</sup> Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. <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.

Now we return to Zechariah, who after years of unanswered prayers and infertility, struggled to believe God's promise. Let's see what he's learned as he's seen Elizabeth and Mary's faith and processed things with God during his forced silence. Verse 63: **(63)**

<sup>63</sup> He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John."

Their custom was to name a baby after an ancestor, but Zechariah instead writes, "His name is John", the name Gabriel already gave the baby back in verse 13. A new level of faith from the man who once struggled with limited spiritual vision that doubted God's promise.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://nationalpres.org/sites/default/files/sermon\\_bulletins/2000.12.17.Barnes.pdf](http://nationalpres.org/sites/default/files/sermon_bulletins/2000.12.17.Barnes.pdf) Accessed online 12/13/19.



As Zechariah sees with faith, verse 64 says: **(64-67)**

<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. <sup>67</sup> His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

In his doubt, Zechariah left the temple unable to speak blessing to the people who needed it. But as Zechariah processed things over the months since, he now has a new level of assurance that God delivers on His promises. Zechariah’s mouth and heart set free as he praises God.

This deeper faith came more slowly for Zechariah than it did for Mary and Elizabeth, but God kept working with Zechariah, as He keeps working with us, and now, Zechariah’s faith-filled praise blesses the people in verses 65 and 66. And in the following verses, Zechariah, filled with God’s Spirit, praises and prophesies all the way through verse 79.

Elizabeth back in verses 41 to 45, Mary in verses 46 to 55, and Zechariah in verses 67 to 79, all three, as they see with eyes of faith, experience Spirit-filled praise. They didn’t stop seeing their hardships, they just also saw God’s promises with faith, and the Spirit moved them to praise. Their praise strengthening the people around them, as our faith can encourage those around us to take next steps with Jesus.

### **Next Step**

This morning we’ve seen the dangers of limited spiritual vision, and that seeing with faith leads to Spirit filled praise. So our next step this morning is an invitation. You’re invited to see with faith the promises of Christmas.

The day I first got glasses, I happened to look out the window to my backyard. And I was shocked, now that I saw clearly, by the detail of everything and by the beauty and vibrancy of the bushes, trees, flowers, and groundcover.

In the same way, what if, this Christmas season, rather than only kinda seeing the promises, like I kinda saw my backyard before glasses, what if instead we put on lenses of faith and see the promises of Christmas afresh, with all their detail, beauty, and vibrancy?

What if this God up on high didn't tell us to get our acts together and climb out of our mess to meet Him up high? What if instead the God elevated high was filled with so much compassion for us that He came down low into our sinful mess to rescue us?

What if this Almighty God didn't come in might among the mighty, but instead initiates His revolution by being born as a baby to an impoverished teenager from a backwater town? And what if His forerunner John who prepared the way came from an old priest who doubted God's promises even when hearing them from an angel?

What if this is how the mystery of divine rescue begins, of how God went about adopting you as His beloved son or daughter with whom He is well pleased? What if that rescue will end with the alone no longer lonely, the hurt no longer hurting, as evil and death are defeated and all things are made new?

What if Jesus came, as Zechariah says:

<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." Amen.

Dismissal – Go in peace to love and serve our wonderful Lord.