

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

December 7, 2025

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: In the Fullness of the Times...

A Proud Father's Greatest Boast

(Luke 1:5-25; 57-80)

Introduction: Glorifying in a win...

We expect to hear winning athletes boast when they win. In fact, it's remarkable if, after a boxing match or a sprint, we don't hear some sort of boast from the victor.

Even humble athletes exult in their win and talk about their win and are excited about their win.

Likewise, a Lottery winner, a victorious politician, a Nobel Prize recipient, and a college graduate will all exult in the win *"in the moment."*

It seems to just make sense. After a big win or a big gain, it's only natural to be focused on the victory, to be excited.

It is also natural for moms and dads to take pride in the birth of their new baby, and that's something we've had the privilege of seeing over the past year or so a number of times.

Today, we're jumping into the Christmas season by hearing the story of a couple who - SURPRISE! - had a baby boy long after they had given up hope for a child.

Toward the end, we'll listen with great interest to this couple's boast. It is a very different boast from what we would expect to hear.

Backstory to the story...

Like any good story-teller, Luke gives us the historical context of the events he is about to describe.

It all took place, not, *"Once upon a time..."* but ***"[:5] In the days of Herod, king of Judea..."***

This was Herod *"the Great."* He was the descendant of Esau (not Jacob and so was not a Jew) and was the *appointed* king of Israel when Jesus was born. And this Herod was an embarrassment to the Jews.

Everything we know about Herod's reign shamed the God-fearing Jews of Israel.

We know from secular and Jewish history that Herod was a violent, immoral, unjust man whose family life was a joke and whose personal life was a wreck.

If at any time in the nation's history, they might have longed for a righteous ruler, it would have been in the days of Herod the Great.

It is worth noting that after this one reference, Herod the Great is never mentioned again in Luke's Gospel.¹

Herod serves only as a timestamp to help us place the events and people who are really important in God's story. The important people in today's story are an elderly couple who loved the Lord.

¹ Herod the Great is mentioned in Matthew's Gospel, not in Mark's nor John. Matthew identifies him only as the madman who killed the babies in and around Bethlehem, so as to do away with Jesus, the threat to his throne.

A Glorious Coming Attraction (Luke 1:5-25)

They Had No Child...(vv. 5-7)

[5] In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. [6] They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. [7] And yet they had no child, because Elizabeth was infertile, and they were both advanced in years.

I think we would have liked Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were an unassuming, respectable, God-fearing couple. They were well into their golden years (we don't know exactly how old they were)...

...and there would have been a certain sadness about them. That's because, while they wanted children, they didn't have children.

Luke tells us that ***"Elizabeth was infertile."*** (Luke 1:7) That's a short, simple phrase. But we could turn that one phrase into a book.

There would have been heartache from decades of longing for what they could not have. There might have been reproach or even insensitivity from those who didn't understand their pain.

Some of you here today know how they must have felt. You've been there. But all of us, whether we've experienced exactly what Zechariah and Elizabeth did, understand disappointment.

We get their core sadness. And now we get to enter into Elizabeth's and Zechariah's story.

Zachariah Receives GOOD NEWS from Gabriel! (1:8-17)

Zachariah, in his priestly role (vv. 8-10)

In those days, there were more priests than there were priestly duties. So, the priests would draw straws (not really, but that is essentially what "casting lots" was) and rotate responsibilities among themselves.

On this day, it was Zechariah's "turn" to offer the daily burning of incense. He walked inside the temple and further in until he came into the Holy Place.

This spot was just outside the Most Holy place. (also known as the Holy of Holies)

The Most Holy place was an inner sanctum in the temple into which only the High Priest was allowed to enter once a year to offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people on the Day of Atonement.

Zechariah wasn't in there. He was in the Holy Place, offering the normal, daily sacrifice, and ***[10] the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.***

This was customary. A crowd of people would gather outside the Holy Place to pray. They would pray that God would be pleased with the priest's sacrifice and that God would protect the priest from harm while he was in the Presence.

But priests offered sacrifices every day. Nothing ever happened during the priest's service. On this day, something happened.

"Zechariah, meet Gabriel!" (vv. 11-12)

[11] Now an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.

This was not a vision or a dream. Just as really as you and I appear to each other right now - an angel showed up in the temple and appeared to Zechariah.

Luke even locates the angel in the Holy Place for us - right next to the altar of incense.

[12] Zechariah was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him.

It is interesting that throughout the Bible, this - FEAR! - is the typical response of people who come in contact with angels.

- ABRAHAM bowed low in reverence before the Angel of the Lord.
- BALAAM, the false prophet, reverently bowed before God's angel.
- ISAIAH fell on his face in the presence of Seraphim.²

We aren't surprised that the old priest was frightened in the presence of God's angel. So, first, the angel said what we expect an angel to say: ***"Do not be afraid, Zechariah!"***

Then, this angel gave the Good News message God had sent him to bring.

"Settle down, Zechariah. I've got Good News for you!" (vv. 13-17)

[13]...“your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John. [14] You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice over his birth. [15] For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, while still in his mother's womb. [16] And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. [17] And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF FATHERS BACK TO THEIR CHILDREN,³ and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

So, a baby will be born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. And this baby is going to be some baby. Everything in the angel's prophecy, right down to the boy's name, is significant.

The baby's name - John - was the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew name Jonah.

When the angel told Zechariah that his son was going to be named, John / Jonah, the old man would have immediately understood that his son would be bringing a message of repentance AND salvation, because that had been Jonah's mission.

² Seraphim are a class of angels especially associated with God's holiness. See Isaiah 6:1-2.

Zechariah would know that what God commissioned the prophet Jonah to do in the pagan city of Nineveh (and what Jonah eventually did, after lots of prompting and prodding from God...), his son, John, would do in Israel for the Jews.

Wouldn't that be a mind-blowing thing for a father to hear about his son? Godly fathers and mothers want to know that their sons' and their daughters' lives are going to count for the Lord.

And Zechariah, this godly old priest, would have been thrilled to know that his son would have this kind of an impact for the Lord.

So...put yourself in Zechariah's shoes.

You've prayed for decades for a child. You were just now in the process of offering sacrifice to God in the temple when an angel showed up - out of nowhere - and promised you that God had answered your prayers.

You and your wife are going to have a baby. The angel has even told you your son's name and has described the life that your son will lead. His will be a life filled with God.

With all of that in mind, listen to the words of Zechariah, the man of God.

Zechariah - Struck Dumb for His Disbelief (1:18-23)

Zechariah QUESTIONED Gabriel! (v. 18)

[18] Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in her years.”

How does that question strike you? Does it surprise you? Does it seem reasonable? Considering all that Zechariah KNEW, how does his question sit with you?

³ This would be a direct fulfillment of a prophecy about Elijah, whose return is predicted before the coming of the Messiah. (See Malachi 4) Jesus said that John was this “second Elijah.”

Zechariah KNEW what was true about his own life - that he and Elizabeth had been childless for a long time. He KNEW that Elizabeth was past the age at which a woman could normally be expected to bear children.⁴ He KNEW that he was an old man.

But Zechariah also KNEW his nation's history - that babies had been born to parents considered too old to do so before. Abraham's and Sarah's story, with the birth of Isaac when he was one hundred and she was ninety, would have come to mind.

He also KNEW that his senses weren't lying to him. He KNEW what God's angel had promised.

These are the things he KNEW. But what he KNEW didn't faze his fear, the fear of news that was too good to be true.

I'm not going to come down too hard here on Zechariah. Yes, he should have done better. But having known myself as long as I have, I'm confident that I would have done no better.

I probably would have asked the same question Zechariah asked. *"I hear what you're promising, Angel. But how can I know that, for sure?"*

We can't escape that Zechariah didn't believe. He was filled with doubts.

For him, this promise would fulfill the one great hope of his life, and he was thinking, *"Stuff like this doesn't happen to people like me...even when God promises."*

His fear of one more disappointment and his unwillingness to simply trust in the promise of God led to his faithless question.

Gabriel DISCIPLINED Zechariah! (vv. 19-20)

[19] The angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. [20] And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which shall be fulfilled at their proper time."

We can put away any thought that Zechariah's question was innocent or noble. Gabriel's response tells us that it was not a good question.

Gabriel was offended by Zechariah's lack of faith in his message.⁵ He was offended by the old priest's refusal to believe and to take God at His word.

So, this proud father-to-be will be under discipline for nine long months. He won't speak a word until the boy is born and named.⁶

Zechariah concludes his service, mute (vv. 21-23)

With this conversation with Gabriel, Zechariah was taking far longer in the Holy Place than a priest normally took to finish a sacrifice.

So, the people gathered outside knew that something was up. I imagine them nervously pacing, wondering at Zechariah's delay.

They may have believed him dead. Not because of his age, but because that was always a danger whenever the priests were ministering in the presence of God in the temple.

Zechariah. But, unless we assume that Gabriel had been told that he was to make Zechariah mute if he didn't believe, we conclude that the angel had the authority to act with a large measure of independence in his dealings with Zechariah. An interesting sidelight to the authority of angels in the affairs of men.

⁴ Actually, it is not exactly clear if she was post-menopausal. It is certainly clear that she was well past the age at which women normally had children.

⁵ It is not that Gabriel was boasting about who he was. He was boasting about the One in whose Presence he was privileged to serve.

⁶ Does it surprise you that the angel appears to be acting unilaterally in this discipline? Clearly, he had been sent with a message from God to deliver to

The book of Exodus (28:33-35) tells us that the High Priest's robe had bells tied on to the bottom of his robe, so that the people could hear the sound of him moving around in the Holy of Holies as he was offering sacrifice and making atonement for the people.

If they didn't hear the sound of the bells, they would know that he had been struck dead, and that the Lord had been displeased with the sacrifice.

Zechariah's robe may have had something similar that the people were listening for - and didn't hear because Zechariah wasn't walking around.

But he hadn't been struck dead, only dumb. As the angel had promised (this was the second promise from the angel), when he exited the Holy Place, he was unable to speak a word.

The Promised Good News Comes True! (vv. 24-25)

After the days of serving his rotation as priest, Zechariah and Elizabeth traveled back to their home in the Judean hill country.

And again, just as Gabriel had promised, ***[24] after these days his wife Elizabeth became pregnant.***⁷

Can you imagine Elizabeth's joy at conceiving after all those years of barrenness? She would have been ecstatic.

And we can be sure that Zechariah was ecstatic, too...but silent.

He received the most wonderful news of his and Elizabeth's long years of marriage FAITHLESSLY. Every day of Elizabeth's pregnancy was a reminder of that faithlessness.

He was a righteous man, but in the one thing he wanted most desperately, he refused to believe what God had promised. He wouldn't believe that God was THAT good and spent nine months in an enforced silence as a discipline.

But, sure enough, in due time, the time of the baby's birth came.

The Promise Come True (Luke 1:57-80)

John's Birth and Naming (vv. 57-66)

John's birth - a cause for rejoicing! (vv. 57-58)

[57] Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she gave birth to a son. [58] Her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her.

Everybody knew that this couple had for decades desperately wanted kids. Now they have a son, and their joy was off the charts.⁸

But, with the baby's eighth day (the day of circumcision), the time had come to name him, and all the relatives and neighbors wanted to help.

John's name - a cause for surprise (vv. 59-63)

After all these years of wanting to be a father, they all thought that it would be most fitting to name him after his father, Zechariah.⁹

Of course, they didn't know that God had already named the boy. How could they have known? Zechariah couldn't tell them.

⁷ Luke tells us that she kept herself in seclusion for the next five months after discovering that she was with child, but he does not tell us specifically why she did this. Was it to avoid further reproach from Jewish women during the time when she was not "showing"?; so that she could engage in grateful prayer to God?; so that she could follow her husband's example of not spreading the news?

⁸ I have had the joy of celebrating with those who have long been childless and then have become parents. What joy!

⁹ How fitting to name him Zachariah - "*God remembers*" - as God had clearly remembered this old couple by blessing them with a baby in their old age.

However, through writing (I assume), he had let Elizabeth know the name that the angel had given him in the temple. She knew and was adamant that the baby's name would be John. But the neighbors and relatives weren't listening to her.

So, the friends **[62] made signs to his father** (which is funny, because there was no problem with Zechariah's hearing; he just couldn't talk), **as to what he wanted him called. [63] And he asked for a tablet, and wrote as follows, "His name is John." And they were all amazed.**

And, at that moment, Zechariah's tongue was loosed, and he was able to speak again - for the first time in nine months - **[64] and he began speaking in praise of God.**

John's father's story - a cause for eager anticipation (vv. 64-66)

Zechariah's immediate ability to speak again took everybody by surprise. They knew that they were witnessing the work of God.

They even speculated about what kind of a child John would be and what kind of a man he would become.

Clearly, the hand of God would be on him. And as all the relatives, neighbors, and friends were marveling that Zechariah could speak, the Spirit of God gave this first-time father a prophetic word.

That word is recorded for us. And it is remarkable.

Zechariah Praises God (vv. 67-80)

Part 1 - Praise to God...for the Son of David (vv. 67-69)

**[67] And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:
[68] "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel...**

With that start, what we're hearing is almost like Zechariah was writing a psalm.

The opening line reminds us David and others who wrote the psalms in our Bibles as he gave praise and glory to God on this, the eighth day of the life of his son, John.

But keep listening to Zechariah.

**For He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people,
[69] And has raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of His servant David -**

Hold it. "**...the house of David**" is of the tribe of Judah. But Zechariah was a priest of the house of Abijah who came from the tribe of Levi.

So, this psalm of praise Zechariah was singing wasn't really all about the son he was holding in his arms. He was praising God for another baby, one born from the tribe of Judah to the house of David - namely, Jesus.

Zechariah may have been the proudest new father on planet earth, but this psalm of praise was all about Jesus, not John. I find that stunning and instructive.

Zechariah continued. It is clear that he understood the coming of Jesus to be the fulfillment of promises God had made long ago.

Part 2 - Praise...for the salvation Jesus will bring (vv. 70-75)

[70] "Just as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient times -

**[71] Salvation FROM OUR ENEMIES,
And FROM THE HAND OF ALL WHO HATE US;**

**[72] To show mercy to our fathers,
And to remember His holy covenant,**

[73] The oath which He swore to our father Abraham,

[74] To grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies,

Would serve Him without fear,

[75] In holiness and righteousness before Him all our days."

In this psalm, Zachariah viewed the redemption that Jesus would bring as something that God had predicted two thousand years earlier when He made promises to Abraham.

Those promises would pass from Abraham to Isaac, to Jacob, to Judah, to David...to Jesus.

Again, Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, was psalming about Jesus.

Then, in the last stanza of his psalm, Zechariah finally turned his attention to his son.

Part 3 - Praise for John's role...in Jesus' reign (vv. 76-79)

[76] "And you, child, also will be called the prophet of the Most High;

For you will go on before the LORD to prepare His ways;

[77] To give His people the knowledge of salvation

By the forgiveness of their sins,

[78] Because of the tender mercy of our God,

With which the Sunrise from on high will visit us,

**[79] To shine on those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace."**

So, yes, Zechariah addressed all of those words to his son, John. But every line focuses on John as John's life relates to the life and ministry of Jesus.

John will...

- ...be the forerunner and prophet to the Messiah, Jesus.
- ...prepare the way for the arrival of Jesus.
- ...make the people aware of their need for the salvation of Jesus.
- ...point them to the means of salvation - Jesus.
- ...guide Israel into the way of peace as he directs them to Jesus.

Whatever we might say about how excited Zechariah was about the birth of his son, this much is clear: His greater joy and excitement was Jesus.

Conclusion:

Zechariah received the gift of a lifetime: a baby! After long decades of longing for a child, he now has a son. But his focus...was NOT on his son. It was on Jesus.

And we can say the exact same thing about Elizabeth.

Jesus' mother, Mary, early in her pregnancy with Jesus, went to stay for a few weeks with Zechariah and Elizabeth in their Hill Country of Judah home.

As soon as Mary entered the house, Elizabeth's baby - John - leapt for joy because Jesus, still forming in Mary's womb, had come near.

And what did Elizabeth say? Not, "How nice that you and I are with child at the same time. I hope they become friends." No.

[Luke 142] And she cried out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! [43] And how has it happened to me that the mother of my Lord would come to me?"

Just like Zechariah, the long-barren Elizabeth, at the time she and Mary greeted each other was six months pregnant, was all about Jesus.

The dynamic going on in the hearts of Zechariah and Elizabeth of being first-time parents whose full attention was on another Baby has struck me this week as it has never struck me before.

You and I have all got a lot going on in our lives and in our world today, don't we?

So, are you fearful about some things happening on the world's stage? And are you deeply concerned about some of what's happening in our own country? To that Zechariah would say, *"Jesus is the KING of kings and the LORD of lords. Find rest in your spirit in Him."*

Did you just win the lottery, or have you just lost your job? Has your health cratered or has your wealth evaporated? Elizabeth would tell you, *"Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. Walk with Him."*

Is your marriage thriving or is it barely surviving? Are you overflowing with wonderful friends, or overwhelmed by aloneness? Today's two old heroes would tell us, *"In Jesus, God has come near. You are never alone."*

Can we learn from this elderly couple that no matter what is going on in our lives, the biggest news is always Jesus, the most important Person is always Jesus, the lead story is always Jesus.

Merry Christmas. Christmas is all about Jesus. LIFE is all about Jesus.