

## Sermon

### *Luke 1:5-25 – Preparing the Way*

Ruth 1:6-13

Pray

#### **Controlling the Future**

As some of you may be aware, I am a registered nurse by profession. I finished my HSC in the early 90's and went straight to university to study nursing. Now, in the early 90's what I did was fairly unusual. There were not too many blokes in the Faculty of Nursing or on the wards where I worked. And coming from a family of brothers, didn't I know it? In fact, I have been given the odd little white dress from family members and so call mates. Thankfully in recent years things have changed and now that are many men that chose to work in this important profession.

But if you had asked me when I was back at school whether I would like to study nursing, I would have cringed and said, "There is no way! I am not interested, it is not for me!" In fact up until about 3 weeks before I enrolled at the Faculty of Nursing, it was only just a vague possibility that I might study there. It was never something I planned. And yet I have spent more time in my life nursing than I spent at school. The truth is **we** have very little ability to control what our future holds.

Youth and young people in our country today have extraordinary opportunities to study and work in all types of professions and fields. But at the end of the day, despite the freedom of choices before all of us, we have very little control over what our future holds. And yet it is so often that we think we can choose our future; choose our next adventure; 'do what you want to do, be what you want to be'. But the reality is much different. You and I have very little control over what our future holds.

And this morning as we step back in time into a world that existed about 80 generations ago, we find a man and a woman who experience this exact same thing. We find a man named Zechariah, a Jewish priest, and his wife Elizabeth.

And we notice that they have about as much control over their own lives and communities around them, as you and I have over our own lives and over the community around us. That is, very little. But the outstanding thing about this account by Luke, is that God steps in and initiates something that will change the world forever.

And so my hope this morning is that you will see that even though we have little control over our worlds, there is one who has complete control, and he can be trusted.

### **Context**

Now, just a reminder if you missed last week, we are looking at Dr Luke's carefully-investigated historical account of the real Jesus. And this book is written for a man named Theophilus, who I think is an educated Roman worker who had just become a Christian and who was wanting to be certain of the truth about Jesus. So this is no fairy tale, this is an historical document written to confirm the truth about Jesus.

### **1. The God who hears**

And as part of his historical account, Luke's first testimony is from this priest call Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. Please follow with me as we read from verse 5.

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

Zechariah and Elizabeth we good people, maybe even good religious people, but even in the righteousness of their lives, they could not avoid one of nature's cruellest curses, being childless. Elizabeth in particular, as we see later in this story, felt the disgrace within her family and community of being without a child. But what can you do? Although it may be your greatest desire to have a family, Elizabeth knew full well that to have children was a privilege, not a right. As much as she desired to change her future, she knew that it was out of her hands.

But Luke's account does not focus its attention on Elizabeth's woes; it actually focuses on a greater issue that is at stake at this time. Luke's account focuses on the testimony of Zechariah as he is given a once in a lifetime opportunity of presenting incense in the temple at Jerusalem.

You see, the Jewish people, although living in Jerusalem, they were ruled by Rome's appointed King, Herod. They were a nation without their own country; they were a people without their own king. The Romans gave them a fair bit of freedom, but ultimately the Jews were waiting to overthrow Roman ruler-ship and establish their own government without interference. The Jews were hoping that the future would be just like their past. But the Jews also knew something very important. Their God was in control of the future, and so they waited and they prayed that God would change things like He had in the past. So every day the Jewish priests would serve at the temple, maintaining as many traditions as the Romans would allow, and offer prayers to God for the restoration of Israel to its former glory.

And it was exactly at this time, when prayers were being offered - symbolised by the incense, that God intervenes and answers their prayer. Follow with me from verse 8.

<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. <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."

God hears the prayers of his people and he intervenes so as to prove his control and to bring about his plan. And this is an important thing for us to understand at this point. God is a God who hears us. He does not ignore our concerns. He does not avoid contact with us. God listens. He is concerned with the injustice we experience. God is concerned with our pain and our difficulty. And God seeks to act against the unfairness we see in our lives.

Now, to be clear, Elizabeth and Zechariah childlessness may have been a big issue to them, but when God hears the prayer of Zechariah and decides to intervene, it is not just to grant them a child. Elizabeth's barrenness is to be paralleled with Israel's barrenness. Israel had no one to lead them. They were not complete without their king, they were disgraced among the nations that lived around them and they were desperate to have their lives changed. And God hears their prayers and steps in to intervene. But although God hears the prayer of his people and steps in to intervene, it is important that his people **prepare** for what is about to happen.

It is a wonderful thing to feel like you have been heard. There is something special about seeing a change in our communities or government because of something we have said. And as Luke begins his account of Jesus' life he wants us to be assured that Jesus' birth was no ransom act of nature, but was in response to the desperate pleas of a broken nation.

## 2. The people must prepare

As God prepares to step in and release the Israelites from their oppression and sadness; as he prepares to make big changes in the way Israel functions as a nation, God demands that his people prepare for the changes that are about to come. And the birth of this boy, John, will be the turning point for many people. Follow along with me, again, from verse 13.

<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."

God **is not** the only one who needs to do some work here. God **is not** the only one who needs to change things. The people of Israel have been praying for something to change, but the reality is that it was the people who needed to change.

Up to this point, the Jewish nation of Israel has been under foreign rule for at least 500 years. They were a sovereign nation, that was until in the 6<sup>th</sup> century before Christ where they were conquered and deported out of their own land by the Babylonians. But their deportation from their country was not just a random act of history; the Israelite people knew full well that it was their rebellion towards God that was going to bring about their downfall. The prophets of the Old Testament never stopped warning the people, “if you reject God, he will reject you, and that is not a pretty place to be.” And so although there were many warning they did not change and the day of their rejection came. They were dragged kicking and screaming from their land. And it was since that day God had been waiting for them to turn back to him.

And so it will be through the life of this boy, John (whose name means 'God is gracious'), that many of God's people will finally turn their hearts back to God. They will finally recognise the arrogance of their ways. They will finally realise that ignoring God does not go unpunished.

But John will not be the final answer to the people's oppression. John only prepares the way for one to come. Remember those last words we read, “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” The Lord is coming, but John is just preparing the way. The people need to be ready before they can accept their king.

### **Switzerland**

A number of years ago just after we were married, Alison and I travelled through a number of countries in Europe. And one of the most beautiful and fascinating countries I found was country of Switzerland. A country completely land locked and at the mercy of those nations around them. They have nowhere to escape if war was to break out against them. And as Alison and I travelled through the beautiful Swiss Alps we were told of underground hospitals and military launch sites ready to be activated in an instant if war was to occur. But it wasn't that just the facilities that were ready, the people were ready as well.

Conscription is compulsory in Switzerland. Military service training is mandatory for all able bodied men. And so if it was so called upon, every Swiss male would be ready to serve its country both in body and in mind.

Would you be prepare today to meet your king today? Are you ready to give your service to his kingdom? The truth is we get lazy. The truth is we always think that we will have time later to get ready. But the reality is most of us have neglected turning our hearts to God or preparing for His return. And most of the time it is because we don't want to believe He will return. We would much rather seek to control our own future which flies in the face of what we know is true.

### **3. Doubts**

The final part of Luke account of Zechariah has a twist. This righteous and blameless man, one of the priests of Israel, questions the angel of God about how his barren wife might be able to have a baby. And I believe most of us would be in the same boat as Zechariah. They are both getting on in years. Elizabeth's womb has been barren. Surely nothing can change that. But the fact is nothing can get in the way of God's plans for his people.

Zechariah, in a moment of doubt, questions the angel and is struck dumb as an answer to his request for a sign. Elizabeth, although barren and getting on in years, falls pregnant and receives relief from her disgrace. But more importantly God's plans are not thwarted by barrenness or unbelief, because his plans are not dependent on us. His plans do not require our approval.

Our stubbornness and our unbelief will not stop Jesus from returning. God has promised that He will return again. It cannot be stopped by our unbelief. Do you think your unbelief in God can stop his plans for the world?

Luke tells us that God's plans cannot be thwarted, not by unbelief and not by barrenness.

## **Conclude**

And so this morning I hope that you have seen that we have little control over the world that we live in. Although we try to have as much control as possible, we are silly to think that we can control our futures. We are silly not to rest in God for our future.

## **Remembrance Day**

The family member of those people who served in World War I, understand this completely. Those men and women who served in World War I, followed the country's call of duty. Those men and women did not know what the future held. They did not know what was about to happen. But those men and women went in to serve ready for whatever the future held. And God calls us to be ready, ready for what the future holds for us. And being ready for the future means we must completely surrender all to him.

Dr Luke tells us that we can be certain that God has complete control of the world. He has complete control of history and all that will happen in the future. Our doubts about Him cannot thwart His plans. Our barren situations will not stop His will being done. And so we must prepare ourselves for the promised return of Jesus. For God hears the prayers of His people and will act against the injustice of this world.

Turn your hearts back to God as you prepare for Jesus' return.