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Series: *The First Songs of Christmas*

Title: "Zechariah's Song"

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Scripture: Luke 1:68-79

Do you remember Dr. Seuss' book, *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*?---more specifically, how it ends? Remember---the Grinch has stolen all the Christmas stuff from every home in Whoville. He's piled it all in this giant sleigh and his plan is to dump it off the top of Mt. Crumpit. As he stands there, he knows the Who's are waking up to homes EMPTY of everything from Christmas trees to Christmas food---so he stops to listen---expecting to hear a lot of crying. Turning to the book:

"The Grinch put his hand to his ear.

And he DID hear a sound rising over the snow.
It started in low. Then it started to grow...

But the sound wasn't sad!
Why, this sound sounded merry!
It couldn't be so!
But it WAS merry! VERY!

He stared down at Who-ville!
The Grinch popped his eyes!
Then he shook!
What he saw was a shocking surprise!

Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small,
Was singing!
Without any presents at all!

He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming!
It came! Somehow or other, it came just the same!

And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling: "how could it be so?

It came without ribbons! It came without tags!
It came without packages, boxes or bags!"

And he puzzled three hours, 'til his puzzler was sore.

THEN the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store.
Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"

And what happened then...?

Well in Who-ville they say
That the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day!

And the minute his heart didn't feel quite so tight,
He whizzed with his load through the bright morning light

And he brought back the toys! And the food for the feast!
And he Himself The Grinch carved the roast beast."

This is my favorite Dr. Seuss' book because in it he shows that Christmas is far more than the gifts and the tree and the decorations and the food. All that is just a celebration of something infinitely more important---news so wonderful that even without all that stuff---we joyfully sing.

And this news we sing about every Advent so powerful---it changes hearts---even old, cold Grinch hearts. As I said a couple weeks back, it is the cure for heart disease---hearts infected by sin.

Well, I don't know if you realize this, but singing was a part of celebrating Jesus' coming from the very beginning---long before Christmas trees and decorations and holiday meals. In fact, at the FIRST Christmas, the key participants---Mary, the angels, Zechariah, Simeon---even Jesus Himself---SANG---and that's how I want us to celebrate ADVENT this year---by looking at their songs---the very FIRST songs of Christmas. My prayer is that like the Grinch---our hearts will grow a few sizes larger---as we better understand the message of Christmas.

Okay---let's get started. Open your Bibles to Luke 1:5-25. Follow along as I point out a few things.

First, the events described in these verses occurred during a GLOOMY period in the life of the nation of Israel because God's people were not living up to their calling. Remember---the Hebrew nation was not just any nation. No---it had been chosen by God from among all the nations to be a priestly nation to the rest of the world. But---in the time of Zechariah, this nation that was TO LEAD all nations to God was BEING LED by the pagan empire of Rome. And Rome was just the last of a LONG LINE of pagan nations that had ruled Israel. For the past six centuries the Jewish people had been ruled by---enslaved by---the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Egyptians, and the Syrians.

Now, in verse 5 Luke reminds us that the king in Zechariah's day was Herod---and he was the first local to sit on the throne since the fall of the Southern Kingdom some 580 years earlier.

But Herod was not a REAL king of Israel. No---he was merely a puppet---put in office by the authority of Rome. In fact, he wasn't even a Jew. Herod was an Idumean---a descendant of Esau---so he had no right to rule. More importantly, Herod was not a man of God. He was just the opposite---a very ungodly, degenerate, and wicked man. He was a cruel tyrant who personally bathed his reign in blood, including the blood of many members of his own family.

Herod also introduced Roman temples into the land and built idols to the Roman gods. Under his leadership Israel became a land filled with immorality---the spiritual life of the Jews lost its vitality. Their worship of God became little more than dry ceremony---rote ritual for most people.

Well, in the midst of these dark and gloomy times, Luke introduces us to a simple, faithful couple, an elderly priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. Now Zechariah was a descendant of Aaron and that automatically made him a priest. As a priest the law required him to marry a Hebrew---but Zechariah had done them one better. He had married a woman named Elizabeth---and she was herself a descendant of Aaron. It was as if a preacher's son was marrying another preacher's daughter. I'm thinking their marriage was seen as a wonderful thing! I mean, there was a lot of rejoicing in both families the day that Zechariah and Elizabeth wed. But all that rejoicing quickly faded when years passed and it became evident that Elizabeth was barren. To understand how crushing this was---remember---in these days a woman of Israel lived for one thing and one thing only: to bear children. Women who could not bear children were shamed and humiliated by their communities. Childlessness was grounds for divorce in that day. This was no doubt because the Jewish Rabbis said that seven types of people were excommunicated from God and the top of the list was, "*a Jew who has no wife, or a Jew who has a wife who has no child.*"

Well, Zechariah and Elizabeth had lived with this shame throughout their married life---but it had not caused them to become bitter or abandon their faith in God. Verse 6 says that "***Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.***" In other words, they held to their trust in God---even though life was disappointing to them both. And I think that had led their peers to respect them for their attitudes of unwavering devotion to God.

In Israel at the time there were about 20,000 descendants of Aaron---all of them priests by birth---just like Zechariah. And since there were so many---and only one temple---they were divided into groups, and those groups served in the temple only two weeks in the year---with various duties allotted to each priest. Zechariah was sort of a "*reservist priest*" – one of many.

The greatest privilege granted to an ordinary reservist priest like Zechariah---the thing they each lived for---was the privilege of burning incense on the altar of the Holy Place. Understand---this was not in the HOLY OF HOLIES itself. Only the High priest was permitted to enter this most sacred place and he did that only once each year on the Day of Atonement. No---this was just OUTSIDE the curtain that surrounded the Holy of Holies and, this coveted privilege of burning incense there was granted by lots---which

means only a few priests were given this opportunity---and if you ever were you never got the chance to try again for you were only allowed to do this once in your entire life.

So, when Zachariah was chosen for this privilege it was like hitting the holy lottery! And of this was no chance of coincidence. God was involved. He wanted Zechariah to have this assignment for a very important reason.

Well, when this day began, the priests ascended the steps leading to the Holy Place. When they got to the top, they spread coals on the golden altar, arranged the incense, and departed, leaving Zechariah alone before God. Zechariah was to offer his prayers of intercession for the people of Israel---and then put incense on the coals of the altar as a powerful, beautiful symbol of the prayers of Israel rising to God. While he was doing this, outside in the court of Israel a great multitude of people waited---laying face down on the floor in prayer, praying with the priest who represented them.

Well, they were hardly prepared for what was to take place that day and neither was Zechariah because in the midst of his prayer---an angel of God appeared and stood right in front of the aging priest. And we must understand the significance of this. I mean, not only was it a shock for an angel to show up. It was also a shock for God to speak to His people. You see, there had been no word from God since those the prophet Malachi had delivered 400 years prior. Well, when the angel appeared Zechariah was understandably afraid. The Bible pictures angels as scary beings. So, as angels always do in the Bible he said, "**Fear not!**" And then he said, "**Your prayer has been heard!**"

Now---what prayer was he referring to? What had Zechariah been praying for? I doubt that he was praying for children. Zechariah and Elisabeth had prayed for children for a long time but in their minds the physical possibility for that happening had long passed---so probably this godly man was praying for the Messiah to come---for God to keep His promise to His chosen people.

But the cool thing is God's answer through the angel addressed both past and present prayers. The angel said that Elisabeth would bare Zechariah a son and that this little boy would not be just any child. No, Zechariah's boy would be named "John" and he would fulfill the 400-year-old prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6 and the 800-year-old prophecy of Isaiah 40:1-5! In verses 16 & 17 the angel referred to these prophecies when he said,

"Your son, John, 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."

In other words, Zechariah's son would have the great privilege of preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah.

Well, this news overwhelmed Zechariah. I mean, the answer to his prayers was simply too much for him to believe so immediately his FAITH gave way to REASON and in verse 18 he said,

"How can this happen? I mean, this is impossible. My wife and I are old---too old."

And at this point Zechariah made the mistake that many of us do. He looked at God through his problems rather than looking at his problems through the power of God. Well, the angel rebuked his lack of faith in verses 19-20. In essence he said, **"How dare you question me...I am not just any angel. I am the angel Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and I have been sent to speak to you and tell you this good news! You should be deliriously happy, praising God, not questioning my word. To prove to you that this is God's truth that I am proclaiming you will be mute for nine months...until the day that John is born."**

Now---Zechariah deserved this judgement because he was questioning God's ability to keep His promise. And---Zechariah knew better than to do this! Had he forgotten what God did for Abraham and Sarah in their old age? Did he think his physical limitations would hinder almighty God?

But before we judge Zechariah---let's ask ourselves---DO WE BELIEVE GOD'S PROMISES? DO WE BASE OUR LIVES ON WHAT GOD SAYS HE WILL DO? I imagine that if Gabriel were to give each of us the punishment we deserve, things would be kind of quiet around here!

Well, this sudden muteness made things hard for Zechariah right away. You see, this once-in-a-lifetime privilege of praying in the Holy Place was to be followed by a benediction that he would be expected to offer. And he couldn't speak! Now while Zechariah was spending all this time in the Holy Place---much more time than normal---the people were lying prostrate on the floor, wondering what was keeping him. When he appeared before them obviously mute, they knew that something special had happened. So, they watched as Zechariah beckoned communicated with them in an improvised sign language---perhaps the first game of charades---silently attempting to pronounce the traditional blessing---all the while knowing that a far greater blessing was yet to come.

Well, in spite of his verbal handicap, Zechariah completed his two weeks of priestly ministry and then returned home---and shortly thereafter, Elisabeth conceived. Nine months later the baby was born and on the 8th day he was circumcised. At this point, it was customary to name the child—the firstborn---after his father. So, the relatives and friends who had gathered thought he would be dubbed, “Zechariah, Jr.” But Elisabeth said, ***“No...he shall be called JOHN!”***

Zechariah had apparently told her of his experience with the angel. In fact, I imagine they passed quite a few notes back and forth as he attempted to describe what had happened to him that day in the temple.

Well, the neighbors and relatives asked ZECHARIAH---what HE wanted to name the child and he asked for a writing tablet---probably one covered with wax---and he wrote on it four words: ***“HIS NAME IS JOHN!”*** not *“Shall be,”* but *“is!”* Zechariah knew that, like all children, his son’s life began at conception, not birth, and that God had already named him---that he was already JOHN.

Well when Zechariah wrote this note---the last of nine months of similar notes---his mouth ***“was opened.”*** His tongue was loosed and the first thing he did with it was sing.

Now, can you imagine his pride! *“My son the prophet! First one in 400 years and it’s MY son!”* If they wore vests in those days I think Zechariah would have popped his buttons as he filled his diaphragm to sing his Christmas song! Over the years the church has given his song the title of: *“THE BENEDICTUS”*--- or *“The Blessing.”* We don’t know the melody but look now at verses 68-79 of Luke 1 and stand in respect to God’s Word as I read the lyrics. Try to imagine these words being SUNG:

68 - “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come to His people and redeemed them.

69 - He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David

70 - (as He said through His holy prophets of long ago),

71 - salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—

72 - to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember His holy covenant,

73 - the oath He swore to our father Abraham:

74 - to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve Him without fear

75 - in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.

76 - And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him,

77 - to give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,

78 - because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from Heaven

79 - to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death,

The lyrics of this Christmas song gives answers to three questions people have about God. Let’s look at them.

1.) Question #1 “Does GOD hear our prayers?”

Zechariah sings, *“YES! God DOES hear our prayers---and He ALWAYS answers them.”* As I said, God answered TWO prayers for this reservist priest. He gave him a son---and told him that the Messiah would be born in HIS lifetime!!! The fact that God ALWAYS hears our prayers is something worth singing about---wouldn’t YOU agree? But one thing Zechariah would tell us is that God ALWAYS hears and always answers but not necessarily IN THE WAY we think He should or even WHEN we think He should. This reminds me of three basic principles of prayer. They are not original with me---but let’s review them:

Principle #1: If our request is wrong---God’s answer will be “NO.”

Remember the time James and John came to Jesus and asked if they could make reservations for the best two seats in heaven---on Jesus’ right and left? Jesus’ answer was, *“NO---I’m not going to grant that one.”* Or how about the time Jesus and the disciples were denied a “travel permit” through a certain part of Samaria. This ticked the disciples off so much that they asked Jesus to destroy the entire place with fire from Heaven. And once again Jesus answered their prayer in the negative. Well, just like those disciples we are very capable of making inappropriate requests of God. And when we do, God answers, *“NO.”*

Have your children every asked you to do something that you knew was not good for them?

“Mom, can I have ice cream and Cinnabon’s for supper?” “Dad, my friends are getting up a soccer game out on 270? Can I go?”

What do you say to requests like that? If you love your kids of course you say NO! Well, our Heavenly Father is no different. When our requests are destructive, or self-serving, or shortsighted, or if God has something better in mind for us---if the request is wrong in any of these ways---God’s answer will always be *“NO.”*

Principle #2: if WE are wrong, God's reply will be: "GROW."

Many of the times we are to blame when God doesn't answer prayer the way we want. Sin in our own lives becomes an obstacle to the miracle God wants to work for us. Psalm 66:18 says if I regard sin in my heart---in other words---if I'm leading a life of disobedience to God the Lord will not respond to my prayers. Matthew 5:23-24 warns that if there is relational discord between me and someone else---it cuts us off from close fellowship with God---and hampers our prayer life. 1st Peter 3 gets specific about this and says, "***Husbands live with your wives in an understanding way. Grant them honor--so that your prayers won't be hindered.***" Any husbands out there wondering why your prayer life is powerless?

The principle here is that whenever we are sinning---whenever we are disobeying God, and we ask something of Him in prayer His reply is basically, "*Why should I honor your requests when you don't honor Mine?*"

If the motive is wrong God will say NO. If we are wrong, God will say GROW and then...

Principle #3: If the TIMING is wrong, God will say "SLOW."

Many times we adults are childishly impatient in our prayers. We ask our Heavenly Father for things at the wrong time and He lovingly says, "*Slow down...I'll answer but not yet.*" We need to understand that God's delays are not necessarily His denials.

In his song of Christmas Zechariah rejoices in the fact that God ALWAYS answers prayer---but according to His perfect timing. Here's a second question Zechariah's song answers:

2.) Question #2 "Is God INVOLVED in this world?"

This is something Zechariah must have doubted. I mean as he looked around at the state of his nation---oppressed by its pagan enemies---slipping further into immorality---this aging preacher must have wondered, "*Why doesn't God do something!*" And if you were honest wouldn't you admit that there have been times that you wondered the same thing today? I mean we watch the news and see all the BAD in our world---we wonder why our Almighty God doesn't DO something.

Well, reading the Bible shows us that God has always been involved in the affairs of men---that history is really HIS story. In fact, if God stopped His involvement, the whole universe would fall apart. As Colossians 1:17 says, "***the universe as a whole in Him holds together.***" God is NOT some absentee landlord uninterested in the affairs of men.

In fact, in his song Zechariah foretold the greatest example of God's involvement---the night soon to come when God would literally join us in the human struggle---that night of nights when He would put on human flesh as He was born in that manger in Bethlehem. For the next 33 years He would live a sinless life and then die on the cross for you and me.

There is a psychiatrist in NYC named John Rosen who works with catatonics. He breaks the precedent of doctors who remain separate and aloof from their patients. You see Rosen loves them enough to move into the ward with them. He places his bed among their beds. He lives the life they must live. Day to day, he shares it. If they don't talk, he doesn't talk either. But then Rosen does something else. He puts his arms around them and hugs them. This highly skilled, highly paid physician who is like God to these people in that he sets the limits on their lives---holds the unattractive, unlovable, sometimes out of control persons and literally loves them back into life. Often, when they finally speak, the first words they say are, "*Thank you.*"

Well, Rosen provides a similar example of what God has done in Jesus. He came to walk the roads we walked. He entered our existence. He took the punishment for our sins. Through His great love He made it possible for us to have eternal life. God couldn't become more involved than that!

There's one more question that Zechariah answers with his song:

3.) Question #3 "Can God be trusted?"

Is He like so many other rulers---who don't always keep their word? Zechariah's song says God is not like that and my experience proves it. Did you know that Elisabeth's name means, "*the promises of God?*" Did you ALSO know that Zechariah's name means, "*Jehovah remembers?*"

So---in his Christmas song Zechariah puts these meanings together and belts out the truth that, "*God remembers His promises! God DOES what He says He will do!*" We can build our lives on God's Word---He is always absolutely faithful.

You know, I've always thought it was kind of cool that our church building has an elevator. Ours---like pretty much all elevators is an OTIS---named after Elisha Otis. Now, Elisha Otis did not invent the elevator---he invented something much more important---the braking system that stops an elevator from falling. Before he came up with this idea building were limited to six floors---so we have Otis to thank for skyscrapers. But at first, Otis had a hard time getting people to trust in his invention---that is until 1854 at an exhibition in Manhattan. Every hour at this exposition---sort of a super trade show---Otis stepped into his brake-equipped elevator. He gave the order to an assistant who cut the rope. The crowd held its breath. The brake kicked in, the elevator stopped and Otis announced: "*All safe, ladies and gentlemen. All safe.*" That demonstration is all it took---sales skyrocketed---as did Otis' bank account balance. Today, the equivalent of the world's population travels on an Otis elevator every three days.

Well, that's a picture of what God did when Jesus was born. He PROVED that He is trustworthy. He did what He said He would do. So you can count God! We can trust Him. This is why Hebrews 10:23 urges us to, "***Hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful!***" This morning I hope you've enjoyed hearing Zechariah's song. I pray that after our study you feel as excited as Zechariah did as he realized these things that he sang about! You can even break out in song if you like. But I want all of you to know that Zechariah was right on all three counts! God always hears and answers our prayers! He IS involved in your life and mine! And He is absolutely trustworthy!

LET'S PRAY.