

In the Shadows

The Cousins

Luke 1:5-79

December 10, 2023

HDBC

Wise men still seek Him.

Jesus is the reason for the season.

You can't have Christmas without Christ.

These are just a few of the catchphrases that are found in Christmas cards and that are posted during this season to remind us of the true meaning of Christmas. The focus truly is Jesus. Linus reminds us of that in the classic Christmas movie, ***A Charlie Brown Christmas***. We must NEVER forget that.

Challenge seems to get greater each year. So many other things have been added to the celebration of Christmas. Food, parties, presents, decorations, music, parades, productions, romance (just watch a few Hallmark movies), and so much more. None of these things are bad. But they can cause us to lose sight of the primary focus. And added to that list the one that might get more attention than all the others, ***family***.

The average person will almost always add that Christmas is a time for families to get together. When I was young, we not only had our immediate family Christmas traditions, but we always visited grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. These were excited times of sleeping on the floor, watching Christmas specials on one of three channels and receiving additional gifts.

When my girls were young, they, too, would visit with cousins at Christmas and enjoy those magical experiences together. Now there is a new generation of cousins that gather in our house at Christmas. Four of those cousins will travel a long distance to come and visit. It is fun to watch the interact with each other, much as the previous generations have done.

Did you know that cousins were part of the first Christmas story? **And just to be clear, I'll not be showing any clips of Cousin Eddie during this sermon.**

This is part two of, *In the Shadows*, where we are focusing on some of the lesser-known characters in the first Christmas story. Today we look at Elisabeth, Zacharias and their son, John. In all honesty, we are not exactly sure of the relationship Mary had with Elisabeth. The language of the New Testament did not have a word for cousin. But it is the most likely word for their relationships.

Luke provides a surprising amount of space in his gospel to these cousins. There are 80 verses in Luke 1 and only 18 focus on the birth of Jesus. The rest are about these cousins. They must be important to the Christmas story. There are five movements found in this chapter related to the cousins. First is . . .

1. The Long Wait (5-7) Read it

We learn three things about this couple from these verses.

1) Zacharias was a priest

He was in the ministry, faithfully serving God.

2) They were faithful believers

They sought to please God in their lives. Serious about spiritual things.

3) They were childless

This is difficult for any couple in any generation who want to have children. In that culture it was especially painful, for children were seen as a blessing from God bestowed upon those who were faithful. They were faithful but were childless. That was painful.

They had waited month after month, and then year after year. Now they were at a point in their lives where the prospects of becoming parents had long-since past. They were resigned in their painful loneliness.

Let me add that their person situation was a picture of the situation with the nation of Israel. They too, had experienced the long wait that brought with it a sense of hopelessness. At the time that Augustus pronounced his decree the people of Israel had 400 years of silence from God. Malachi had said God would send the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord, but no one had come, and God had not spoken again. No prophets. No angels. No deliverer.

During those years Israel had been rocked by revolution, war and heartache. Many of them were scattered in foreign lands. Some had returned and tried to rebuild the nation. A short-lived revolution by the Maccabees brought temporary hope, but it was crushed by Pompey the Great, the Roman emperor who brought Israel under bondage again. Every day that they walked by the temple they saw a Roman flag flying there.

And then God sent His angel to a humble priest with a message of hope, not only for he and his sweet wife, but also for the nation and the world. **The long wait was over for the couple and the world!**

2. **The Divine Moment** (8-25) Read it

Wow! Talk about a life-altering moment. Everything for this couple was about to change, and not only for them but for the world.

There were many priests in those days. Priestly duties were allocated according to divisions of priests. When it was his division's time he went to Jerusalem. While there he was given the honor of burning the incense. This was such a high honor it could be done only once in a lifetime.

He entered the holy place to burn the incense before the Lord. **While there** he was visited by an angel. (10-12).

The Holy Place, with all its gravity and mystery, grabbed Zacharias by the senses and held him captive for what seemed an eternity. He tilted his head back and breathed in the mingled aroma of bread, incense, cedar, and the burnt flesh of sinners' substitutes. Ministering in the Holy Place was a rare opportunity in the life of an ordinary priest, so he consumed every detail with his eyes, fully intending to return there in his mind for years to come.

It was darker than he imagined. Cedar-paneled walls disappeared into the darkness nearly a hundred feet overhead before meeting a ceiling he could barely make out. Finely crafted furniture adorned God's enormous antechamber, and the gold implements appeared to be as holy as their purpose. Seven lights of a large golden lampstand flickered on his left. On the right stood a table with twelve loaves of unleavened bread, neatly arranged in two rows of six. A few steps ahead, the altar of incense. A flat, square surface standing three feet high. And overlaid with pure gold. And

within arm's length of the altar, a thick linen veil separated him from the potentially lethal presence of the Almighty.

This was the place where men met God.

His task wasn't complicated. Twice each day, a priest slipped behind the outer veil with a censer of coals from the altar in one hand and a measure of incense in the other. It should take only a few minutes, but Zacharias wasn't about to rush anything.

He stepped forward, poured the coals onto the altar and then covered them with a finely ground powder of spices and frankincense. A few moments later, he could barely see the blue, purple, and scarlet cherubim woven into the veil that hung between him and the Most Holy Place. As the smoky perfume rose to the nostrils of God, a faint breeze brushed the back of the old priest's neck and for a moment, he felt certain he was not alone.

Amazing that God chose to speak with a priest at all and to reveal himself in the temple. The temple service had become so politicized that it was far from what God originally intended. In general, the priesthood was pretty corrupt. I love how Charles Swindoll imagines it.

He was told that his prayer had been answered. (13) What prayer? For a child? Yes. Surely, he had earlier prayed for a son. But most likely that prayer had long since ceased to be on his lips. Could also refer to his prayer for the coming of the Messiah. The angel said he would have a son. His son would be a special person with a very special ministry.

He would prepare the people for the appearance of the Messiah. Like his Messiah cousin, he would grow up in relative obscurity, but would come onto the scene at the time appointed by the sovereign God. He would identify Jesus as the Messiah and call upon people to follow Him. Watch what happened next.

3. The Family Visit (39-45) Read it

Mary could hardly contain herself with all the news she had just received. Not only would she be bearing the Son of God, but her cousin had become pregnant in her old age. This demanded a visit. There is more to this visit

than I have time to unpack. But I want to point out one of the significant things that happened.

As Mary entered the house and spoke with Elisabeth, the unborn child in Elisabeth's womb immediately began to move. This might have been coincidentally, but Holy Spirit made it clear that John was reacting to Mary's voice in a miraculous way. Watch this!

John announced the presence of Jesus at the beginning, even before either were born. And he would announce Him three decades by baptizing Him in the Jordan river and declaring to all who would hear that Jesus was the Messiah, the Lamb of God, the Savior of the world.

4. The Surprising Name (57-66)

Mary stayed with Elisabeth for three months, until it was almost time for John to be born. Wouldn't you love to know what they talked about. I can imagine the elderly Elisabeth pouring into Mary, building her faith and helping prepare her for the road she had chosen to take. We don't know if they ever visited with each other again, but we know their sons would be forever woven together not only in the Christmas story but in the redemption story.

To summarize, the baby was born. When it came time to name him all the people assumed he would be Zach, Jr. That was not to be. Zachariah announced his name to be John, in obedience to the instructions of God. At that moment, his mute condition was healed, and he began to praise the Lord.

5. The Prophetic Statement (67-79)

Luke wraps up this part of the story by recording a prophecy uttered by Zacharias. That will be for another sermon at another time. To summarize:

Redemption has come. He recognized that this was not just about his family. God has remembered His covenant. He is faithful.

John would be a prophet who would prepare the way for the Lord.

So, what are we to make of this part of the Christmas story? What can we learn from the inclusion of these cousins in the Christmas story?

1. God is full of surprises

He delights in taking impossible situations and using them as opportunities to show His love and His faithfulness. He fulfills His promises in His own way and in His own time. This can be frustrating for us, but it is what He does.

2. Silence does not signal indifference

God was silent for decades as Zachariah and Elisabeth moved through life without a child. God was silent as Israel lived through centuries of turmoil and uncertainty. Neither one had been forsaken by God. He saw. He knew. He planned. He ultimately acted.

3. Brokenness is healed through new birth

God brought life into Sarah's dead womb leading to a new birth.
God brought life into Mary's virgin womb leading to a new birth.

Sarah gave birth to the one who would announce hope and redemption.
Mary gave birth to the one who would secure hope and redemption.

Each one was part of the process of healing the brokenness of our world.
Each one was part of the process of healing the brokenness of an individual.

Your brokenness can only be healed through new birth.

New birth comes through faith in the one who was born of a virgin,
was placed in a manger,
was announced by the angels,
was worshipped by shepherds and wise men,
was baptized by his cousin,
was loved and followed by the common people,
was rejected by the religious hypocrites,
was killed by the Romans,
was buried by his friends,
was resurrected by the power of His Father,
who continues to draw sinners to receive his grace and be saved.

New birth comes through faith in that person . . . Jesus,
the creator of the world, the baby of Christmas,
the resurrected king, the gracious Savior.