

Introduction

There are lots of ways to prepare for Christmas... Advent wreaths, shopping, baking, cutting and putting up the tree, and yes, even decking the house with lots of lights. Today I want to help us get ready for Christmas, not only on the outside, but also in our hearts. I want us to look at a person from the Bible, Zechariah, who wasn't ready for Christmas.

Background

Let's look at the book of Luke, the first chapter. In his preface, Luke was doing something very important here, he is recording actual history. "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4)

Note the words he used: "careful account", "eyewitness", "investigate", "orderly account", and "know for certain." Why is this important? What we believe as followers of Jesus is not a collection of legends, myths, nice stories, or a lot of good fiction. It is actual events that occurred in human history. Your faith needs to be based on something more than hopeful wishing. It needs to be based in reality...the physical, social, political, historical, emotional, spiritual realities of our world. Luke wants to locate us right in the realities of the world when Jesus of Nazareth was born. **What helps us to prepare for Christmas is to know that what we hear and believe** in the Bible, is true and can be trusted.

In telling of the life of Jesus, Luke starts with the very first baby announcement, that of John the Baptist, who would help prepare the world for the coming King. Luke 1:5-7: "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. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years." In this background summary of John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, we find that they were both of priestly clans, having responsibilities for conducting worship in the temple. Not only were they religious, but they were spiritually mature. The Bible says they were upright, their hearts and lives were directed

straight up to God. They were doing all the right things with a sincere desire to please God. But something was missing.

Everyone in that culture believed that if God was really pleased with you, you would have lots of children. They had none. Can you imagine their confusion? "We are doing everything we know how to honor God, but we have not been blessed in the way we hoped. Where is God? Does He hear our prayers? Doesn't he care about our shame?" Sometimes it seems that doing right and being right with God do not really make a difference. **What helps us to prepare for Christmas** is to know that what we hear and believe in the Bible, is true and can be trusted, **even when we cannot see it. Keep doing the right thing. That is what Zechariah did.**

In the Temple

Luke 1:8-10: "Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside."

It was Zechariah's turn to serve in the Temple. Like our National Guard, it was his division's turn in the rotation. He went to Jerusalem to serve in the temple and lo and behold, he (out of a thousand men) was chosen to go into the holy place in the temple and lead the people in worship. As the people waited outside, he went in the Holy Place of the temple and burned incense before the presence of God. When the people saw the smoke go up, that was their cue to pray. **Isn't that great imagery? The people pictured their prayers going up as a sweet aroma to God.** What do you think Zechariah prayed as he lit that fire? Possibly, "Lord, you know my heart and our desire for a child. I give it to you."

Is there something on your heart that you are still longing for? Something you feel God would want you to have? A healing in you life? A restored relationship or maybe new one? A peace and joy that has been eluding you? A purpose and a vision for your life that would really fulfill you? Don't give up. Pray and wait. In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, we are encouraged to **"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."** When we persevere in prayer, we stay connect to God. Andy Stanley in his book, *Visioneering*, says, "God is using your circumstances to position and prepare you to accomplish his vision for your life." **What helps us to prepare for Christmas is to:** 1) know that what the Bible bears witness to is true and can be trusted, 2) even when we cannot see it; **and 3) keep on praying.**

A most amazing thing happens. Luke 1:11-12: "Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear." An angel of God appears and Zechariah is caught off guard. There are over 300 references to angels in the Bible. They are messengers for God and are described as pretty awesome warriors who were part of God's army. Most Jews believed that if you encountered an angel, they were there to destroy you, so naturally Zechariah is afraid.

This angel was Gabriel, one of the most important and powerful angels mentioned in the Bible, so I am sure he was imposing presence. Gabriel knows that he looks intimidating, so the first thing out of his mouth is, (Luke 1:12-17), "Do not be afraid, Zechariah." And he continues with good news, "your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 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 from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he 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." **What helps us to prepare for Christmas is to:** 1) know that what the Bible bears witness to is true and can be trusted, 2) even when we cannot see it; 3) keep on praying; and 4) **look for God to actually work.**

What was Zechariah's reaction to all this. Luke 1:18: Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." What happened? Was he too old to believe? Did he have too many prayers go unanswered? More disappointments than he could handle? Maybe? Mostly, though, he forgot. He forgot that God is working even when you can't see it and that with God, all things are possible!

Is there an issue in your life that weighs on you, feels overwhelming at times? Are you tempted to give up? Have you stopped believing that good can come out of your hard circumstance? You are not alone. Most of us struggle in our faith. We all have times that really test us and make us wonder "Where is God?" And just at the right time, God shows up.

I have a friend who really went through it some years back. His business partner quit, a major contract deal fell through, a creditor is bugging him for payment, and his computer crashed all on the same day. It was very hard for him, but he hung in there. He prayed to Jesus, he called close friends to talk and pray,

he dug into the Bible so the Holy Spirit can give him guidance and support. Today is has two businesses, is married to a wonderful woman and they have a beautiful son. Is his life easy? No, he could list a dozen challenges he faces each day. He continues to do the best he can, and all the while, he is trusting God to work in and through him.

The Bible shows us that there is no situation or problem too big for God. We need to invite God, daily, to help us or like Zechariah, we might forget and lose hope. Zechariah is rebuked by Gabriel and told he will not speak until the promised child comes. To his credit, Zechariah does believe and his heart is truly prepared for what God is going to do. He returns home and invites his wife to try one more time to have that child they so yearn for. And they, with God's help, conceive.

May we, this Advent season, prepare our hearts for God's miracles. This afternoon, go home and read Luke 1 and see how God prepared his people for the coming of his Son, Jesus. Then ask God what you need to do to get your heart and life ready for Jesus this Christmas.