

The Day that Changed Everything

Christmas Cousins-Part 2

Luke 1:11-25

For every one of us, we tend to measure life by years. If someone says to you, “Well, tell me about yourself.” More than likely you’ll begin with, “Well, I’m 25 years old, or I just turned 40.” And then the tears begin to flow. Or, “I just turned 16!” And there are not tears there – except from the parents.

Another way to mark the passage of life is by key dates – like a wedding anniversary. I was married on July 11, 1981 – we recently celebrated our 30th anniversary.

I wonder how many couples in here have been married more than 30 years – 40 years – 50 years – 60 years. Sir, when’s your anniversary . . . sure, go ahead and ask your wife.

Anybody in here married less than 5 years – 4 years – 3 years – 2 years – 1 year? Young man, you might even remember what time it was – what time was it when you got married? Was it light out – you don’t remember, because you were so overwhelmed by the moment, right? I thought so.

Another way people measure life is by unique accomplishments.

Perhaps you can remember that moment when you got your driver’s license or graduated from college or grad school. Life was marked by those moments. Those were defining moments.

I know some golfers who think of life in terms of “before and after” they played at Pebble Beach or knocked in that hole in one. There are outdoorsmen who think in terms of what happened in life before and after that trophy catch.

Another way we often measure life is by those critical decisions you made along the way; when you

took that job – when you decided to purchase that home – when you stepped down from that position. Hopefully among the list of critical decisions – in fact, at the top of the list is your decision to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

I have here in my hand a pocket New Testament. It represents that defining moment for me. I keep this in my pickup truck – in fact, I’d lost track of it for years and then came across it a couple of years ago in a box of mementos.

This Bible is all the more special because I could only remember sometime in the spring of my Junior year in High School giving my life to Jesus Christ. And then I saw in the flyleaf of this little New Testament where I had signed my name and underneath it written the words, “Conversion, May 18, 1975.”

That decision, unlike any other decision I’ve made or will make – has determined my eternal future.

Some of you can remember key moments where you made a decision where you surrendered your life to Christ in some ministry – as a volunteer . . . and now you know how many years you’ve been at it. For you perhaps, it meant a full time vocation on a college campus . . . or military base; perhaps as a full time missionary overseas . . . deciding after long and earnest prayer which country where you would give your life.

You can remember when that airplane touched down as if it were yesterday.

What a mark – written on the calendar of your life.

Many people further mark their lives by personal trial or tragedy;

- it's been 10 years since our child passed away
- it's been 4 years to the day when we filed for bankruptcy
- 5 years ago we lost everything in the hurricane
- this month 3 years ago we got the diagnosis from the doctor

And life changed after that. The truth is, all of measure our lives by a combination of all the above, don't we? Accomplishments – birthdays – anniversaries – decisions – graduations – ministries – even trials.

They stayed with us, simply because they marked us – in fact, they measured us!

They revealed who we were and what we were becoming.

In fact, our view of these defining moments communicates more about our faith and trust God than just about anything else in life.

A defining moment has just occurred in the life of an old, faithful priest. From that day, until the day he died, he would tell and retell the story – the moment, when he realized he wasn't alone in the Holy Place – and angel was standing there – the angel Gabriel.

For Zacharias, life would forever revolve around that encounter – and what it meant for him and for his wife.

For them, life was divided into – Life before the angel came – and life after.

The day the angel came changed their lives forever.

According to *Luke's Gospel account, and chapter 1*, the angel's name is Gabriel.

And his appearance inside the Temple's Holy Place where Zacharias was offering incense to the Lord – that sacred task every Old Testament priest dreamed of performing – in fact, it was so special that a priest could only perform that task once in his lifetime.

As the perfumed smoke clears away, Zacharias finds himself looking into the face of an angel. That hadn't happened to anyone for over 400 years. There had been no word from God through prophet or priest. These were called the 400 silent years.

And Zacharias was terrified- literally petrified – and Gabriel has to begin his message by saying what

he's always said to human beings – “stop being afraid.”

Gabriel had appeared hundreds of years earlier to Daniel, the prophet – and Daniel later wrote, it took his strength away.

Daniel went on to describe Gabriel as wearing a linen robe. Significant because the High Priest wore a linen robe as he entered the Holy of Holies . . . it signified access to God – and Gabriel will inform Zacharias that he indeed stands in the presence of God.

Gabriel was also described as having a belt of pure gold wrapped around his waist . . . no doubt reflecting light all around that Holy enclosure. Gabriel's face had the appearance of lightning – no doubt so bright that Daniel and Zachariah both would have shielded their eyes as they looked at him.

The eyes of Gabriel, also described by Daniel were glowing red as if they were on fire. The angel's arms and feet looked like polished bronze and his voice was described as a long, low rumble.

No wonder Daniel fell on the ground (Daniel 8:17) and Zacharias was gripped by fear here in Luke 1:12. And that was at the sight of only one angel!

Job chapter 38 informs us that the millions of angels were created by God to serve Him before the creation of the world.

They sang together as the Son of God spoke forth the will of Triune God and the universe was created (Genesis chapter 1).

At that time, all the angels were good – but sometime before or just after creation, the highest ranking angel named Lucifer led an army of angles in palace Coup D'état against the throne of God. They were judged and they fell from their high and privileged estate.

Now, fallen angels are most often referred to as demons – confirmed in their unholy rebellion and ever since then growing even more rebellious as they do everything possible to thwart the purposes of God and defeat the work of God and diminish the worship of God as they knowingly draw nearer and nearer to the coming judgment of God.

They are not only under the thumb of our sovereign Lord, they are vastly outnumbered by the hosts of heaven.

In fact, when John the Apostle toured heaven in the Book of Revelation, he saw the mind boggling

sight of at least one hundred million angels worshipping before the throne of God.

And Gabriel has just come from the throne of God to deliver a message to Zacharias – this faithful, 80 year old priest.

Let's go back to verse 13 of Luke's account in chapter 1. ***But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. 14. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.***

Now I want you notice as Gabriel reveals the character and career of their future son.

John's Character

First, Gabriel speaks to the character of their little boy, John.

And I want you to be aware of three ingredients that mark the character of John.

- **We'll call the first one: Dedication**

Notice verse 15. ***For he will be great in the sight of the Lord.***

The word "great" is megas (μεγας) which gives us the word mega.

He's going to be greatly significant in the sight of the Lord.

This speaks not only to the depth of his character, but to the greatness of his role as the forerunner of the Messiah . . . I mean, what a great and commendable ministry uniquely occupied by this one person in redemptive history.

But you need to notice carefully that Gabriel is *not* saying that John will be great in the sight of religion . . . did you notice that? The angel doesn't say, "He'll be great in the sight of the religious leaders . . . great in the sight of his peers . . . great in the sight of his culture."

Oh no . . . most people won't care for him one iota. They're not going to be all that excited about his call to repentance and his prophetic marking of disciples by immersion in cold, muddy water.

Mark's Gospel account describes him as a prophet who appears in the wilderness without any introduction; any sanction from Rabbi's or the priests of Jerusalem – never mind any of that, he just starts preaching repentance – challenging even the religious leaders' sinful lives.

Camel hair for his clothing; austerity in his bearing; wild honey and locusts as the staple in his diet . . . thundering in his voice for the nation to prepare for their coming Messiah.

He might be ***great in the sight of the Lord***, but he's going to be really strange in the sight of the locals.

- **Secondly, the character of John will be marked by separation**

Notice ***verse 15 again*** – and he will drink no wine or liquor – that word gives us the word beer. In other words, he'll not drink strong drinks – he'll live a life separated from strong drink and separated unto the calling of God.

Why? Some believe it's because John was being raised as a Nazirite – but nothing is said in the Gospels of him not cutting his hair – which was another signature sign of the Nazirite vow.

I believe that John will not drink strong drink simply because he's functioning effectively as a priest, like his father Zacharias, and according to the Old Testament requirements, a priest was never allowed to drink strong drink while on duty (Leviticus 10:9).¹

And John the Baptist, like every Christian today who serve as royal priests before God – are never off duty.

The Apostle Paul would write, "Don't be under the influence of wine, but be dominated by the Holy Spirit."

In other words, don't let your mind be controlled by an intoxicating substance – let your mind be controlled by the indwelling Spirit.

And that leads me to the third ingredient of John's character.

- **The character of John will be defined not only by dedication and separation, but by consecration.**

Notice the last part of ***verse 15*** – ***and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.***

Listen, this filling was prenatal. The text does not mean, as some have tried to say that this meant John was indwelt with the Spirit "even from birth." Oh no . . . the original construction and the context both demand that this be understood to mean that John

will be indwelt by the Holy spirit “while still in the womb.”ⁱⁱ

One expositor wrote, “Such total invasion by the Holy Spirit of God is unprecedented [in Old Testament times – and certainly in the womb in any dispensation]; what’s happening here is this – John’s prenatal filling was prophetic of the filling of the Holy Spirit that would become the hallmark of all who are in Christ.”ⁱⁱⁱ

At the moment of spiritual life – there is the indwelling of the Spirit of God.

Which by the way, becomes an unbelievably significant revelation in our understanding of a pre-born child.

The pre-born is not fetal tissue. The angel doesn’t refer to the preborn John as an “it” or a “thing”. Gabriel refers to the preborn baby as “he” – ***“he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb.”***

Imagine the truth of it – this isn’t fetal tissue, but a living person and wrapped inside is an eternal soul.

John’s Career

Now with that angelic introduction of John’s character, Gabriel refers to John’s career.

His career is going to impact three different elements within society:

- **First, John’s career would impact the disconnected**

Your translation might include the repetition of the verb – to turn – it appears a couple of times in ***verses 16 and 17.***

It means to convert – to turn around – to cause a return.^{iv}

Listen, John the Baptist isn’t just going to turn things upside down, and inside out; he’s going to turn everything completely around.

And notice ***verse 16. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. He will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah.***

Malachi the prophet effectively said in his closing words that the coming Messiah would be preceded by the coming of Elijah.

And then the silence of God descended on the nation for more than 400 years.

But then . . . the first prophet in 400 years to speak appears on the scene.

It’s this little boy, now all grown up – his name is John – a direct descendant of Aaron, the Jewish high priest. His cousin, Jesus will be a direct descendant of King David. So what you effectively have is the High Priest announcing the King of Israel.

Or beyond that – you have the High Priestly office introducing the final Sacrifice.

His work will fulfill the promise of Malachi and he even mirrors the ministry and spirit of Elijah who stood alone, fearlessly condemning the spiritual rebellion of his nation and preaching repentance. ^v

In other words, he told everyone – you need to turn around and reconnect with God.

- **Secondly, John’s career will not only impact the disconnected but the disinterested**

Notice the middle part of ***verse 17*** – here’s the second reference to turning – causing a return – ***He will turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children.***

John’s ministry would so impact the hearts of people that it would revolutionize the way they lived in their homes. Father’s would be so converted that they would care for their families.^{vi}

Regenerated hearts would redefine relationships in the home.

Father’s would come alongside mothers in caring for the development and spiritual growth of their children.

Listen, this truth is still alive and well.

You get outside a culture which has been influenced by the gospel and you will find a culture where children don’t matter and women don’t either. In fact, outside of the western world, predominately influenced by the Bible – you discover that women are beasts of burden. Polygamy is rampant. And children are the sole responsibility of the women. If you’re not sure I’m right, you really ought to travel more.

But go to a culture impacted by the gospel and you’ll discover the value of a woman dramatically increases – she is honored, and faithfully loved and cared for. Children also are treasured as gifts and not burdens. Faithful monogamy becomes the goal and the ideal.

I couldn’t believe I was actually reading a USA newspaper – although I’ll have to say this article in my files was dated 2004 – I’m not sure they’d have the courage to print it again.

But listen to this – the article is entitled, “Do Evangelical Protestant Fathers Really Know Best?” Let me tell you, this article drew fire from and criticism like you can’t imagine. Again, I’m shocked it was even printed. But here goes, and I quote, “Religious congregations give young families social support and enforce certain norms about what it means to be a good father. Protestant men are more likely to show affection toward their children than religiously unaffiliated men; they are more likely to want to know what’s going on in their children’s lives, and committed Protestant men have the lowest rate of domestic violence of any singular group in the United States of America.”^{vii}

The gospel does that. Here’s something you didn’t hear in class – the western world did not produce Christianity – Christianity produced the western world with all its freedoms and its treatment of women and children.

And fathers who follow Jesus Christ live this way – and when we fail we confess it and get back on our feet.

- **Thirdly, John’s career will impact disobedient.**

The last part of verse 17 reads, “*and the disobedient (again, are turned) to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*”

And with that, Gabriel ends his message from God . . . and what an announcement it was. Zacharias – I know you and your wife are 80 years old, but you’re going to have a baby – and he’ll be the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah. I can just see Zacharias – he’s probably spilled frankincense on his robe . . . his mouth is hanging open . . . his mind is completely blown away.

And **verse 18** tells us that Zacharias’ first words are, “Oh, Gabriel, messenger from the living God – this is wonderful news!” Not quite.

Verse 18. Zacharias first word to the angel was, “How?”

God has moved this faithful priest to the outer limits of his faith and he says what everyone of us say whenever we’re beyond the boundaries of our belief too – “How you going to do that? How in the world are you going to pull that off?!”

Zacharias says, “How will I know this for certain?”

In other words, “I’d like a sign.”

Now get this – Zacharias is in the Holy Place – suddenly, for the first time in 400 years, an angel is not only sighted, he’s standing in the Holy Place, with a face like lightning and eyes like burning coals and Zacharias says, “I need a sign!”

Are you kidding?

Zacharias says in **verse 18** – *Look, I am an old man!* My wife’s an old woman! I love this next line – I am Gabriel – who stands in the presence of God – who, by the way, is the Great I Am.

In other words, the obstacles of your “I am” are not a problem for “The Great I Am”.

But, okay . . . here’s the sign of your unbelief – the next few verses inform us, “You will physically mirror the spiritual condition of your unbelieving nation – they don’t speak for me and they don’t hear me.”

Luke chapter 1 and verse 62 lets us know that Zacharias was not only unable to speak, he was unable to hear – until his son was born, a little more than 9 months later.

Verse 23 informs us that Zacharias had to stay and finish his week of service – never mind what he claimed to have heard.

I would agree with some who believe the Rabbi’s and the priests more than likely wrote this off as hysteria – this was a country priest . . . he was old.^{viii} His mind must have gotten muddled in all the excitement of being able to go into the Holy Place. He’s going to have a son – the forerunner of the Messiah? Poor guy, he really oughtta retire!

As soon as his week was over, Zacharias raced home. No doubt he was driving his mule way past the speed limit – probably reaching a top speed of 5 miles an hour.

I can imagine him finally arriving home, racing through the front door, grabbing Elizabeth and motioning for her to listen – but he can’t make a sound. He starts playing charades – two syllables, rhymes with maybe – you’re going to have a baby. She thinks he’s lost his mind too.

She can’t read his mind. Which is encouraging, isn’t it – they say that old couples can read each other’s mind. I’ve been married for 30 years and still can’t do it.

It’s not encouraging to hear that older couples can read each other’s minds – I don’t believe it anyway.

I read about one couple that had been married for 60 years. They were sitting on the porch when he

just got all overwhelmed with sentimentality and emotion and he leaned over toward her and said, "Honey, over all these years, I have found you tried and true." She said, "What did you say?" He raised his voice and said louder, "I have found you tried and true." She looked at him for a moment and then said, "And I'm tired of you too."

That's the real story on mind reading . . . don't depend upon it!

Zacharias had to get some writing material, or a slate and he started to write and the more he wrote, the more she found it hard to breath.

We're going to have a baby . . . you gotta be kidding.

Here's what I think was more than likely happening to this older couple who had faithfully served the Lord.

No doubt word of his encounter with an angel had already reached Elizabeth . . . his claim to see an angel . . . the paralysis of his voice . . . his loss of hearing. And now he arrives home with strangeness written all over him . . . unable to speak or hear. Lord, why this, too?

Why would God send an angel and the result add even more pain. He has served God faithfully – they both have been known for their commitment to God – in spite of their disgrace among the covenant people of God – they had refused to walk away.

And now – after 50 years of service in the Temple – an angel comes and it's only more bad things . . . the angel has taken away my husband's ability to speak or hear.

Why this? Why now?

But the ways of God are beyond our comprehension. The delays of God are beyond our understanding.

Most often we're never enlightened as to our suffering – we are only encouraged to trust and persevere and His grace will be enough.

While you pack your things away, let me read you a lengthy but powerful story of answers coming late in life to the mysterious working of God's plan. In 1921 a young missionary couple left Sweden for the interior of Africa. They were soon joined by another young missionary couple and together they decided on a remote village.

When they arrived however, the chief rejected them and would not let them enter his village for fear of displeasing the local gods. The two couples had no choice but to go up a hillside and on a slope

of land build their own mud huts. They prayed for a spiritual breakthrough, but none came.

Their only contact as a young boy who was allowed to sell them chickens and eggs twice a week.

Svea Flood, David's wife, decided that if this was the only villager she would be allowed to talk to, she would take every advantage of it – and teach him the gospel of Christ. Soon, this young African boy accepted Christ and the free gift of salvation.

Beyond that little boy, there were no other advancements made into that village.

In the meantime, malaria began to strike this small missionary team. The other couple finally decided they'd had enough and left David and Svea Flood alone – on that hillside, in their mud hut. In the midst of these trying times, Svea became pregnant and only then did the village chief softened his hard stance against them. He allowed a midwife from the village to help her when their little girl was born.

It was all too much of a strain for this young missionary – she was weak from her delivery along with her battle with malaria – she lived only another 17 days and then died.

Something caved in at that moment in her husband's heart and mind. David Flood dug a crude grave, buried his 27 year old wife, and took his child down the mountain to a mission station where he handed a missionary couple his daughter and said, "I'm going back to Sweden. I've lost my wife – I can't take care of a baby – God is not good – He has ruined my life." With that he turned his back on his daughter, his ministry, on God Himself.

Within 8 months little Aina was alone again – for her adoptive parents also died of malaria. Aina was given to yet another missionary couple who was retiring from the field. They brought her home with them and raised her in the United States.

Her name was changed to Aggie and she grew up under the care of her adoptive parents in South Dakota. She eventually attended North Central Bible College in Minneapolis and married a man who entered the ministry.

She knew very little of her past. She only knew her parents names, the fact that she had been born in Africa, that her mother had died soon afterward and that her father had given her up for adoption. She assumed her father lived in Sweden but she had never met him.

She enjoyed her growing family and a fruitful ministry supporting her husband who eventually became the president of a Bible College in Seattle, Washington.

Then one day a Swedish religious magazine appeared in their mailbox at home. She had no idea who'd sent it – in fact, she couldn't read the language.

It was a complete mystery – but as she stood there turning the pages, all of a sudden a photograph arrested her attention. It was a jungle setting in Africa – the photograph focused on a grave with a simple white cross at the head of it – and carved into that little white cross was the name, Svea Flood.

She rushed to the office of a college faculty member who could translate the magazine article – he summarized it for her telling, “Well, it's about missionaries who came long ago . . . the birth of a baby . . . the death of the young mother . . . the one little African boy who had been led to Christ by the woman before she died . . . how after the missionaries had left, the boy had grown up and persuaded the chief to let him build a school . . . he won all his students to Christ . . . and eventually their parents . . . the chief also . . . today there were 600 believers in that village.”

For their 25th wedding anniversary, the Bible College gave them a vacation trip to Sweden, where, among other things, Aggie could finally search for her father. She discovered that he had remarried years earlier, had a family of four children, but that bitterness had slowly taken its toll . . . he had only recently suffered a stroke.

After an emotional meeting with her half brothers and sister, Aggie brought up the subject of seeing her father. They replied, you can talk to him, even though he's very ill, but you need to know that he's had one rule in our family and no one has ever been allowed to break it. The rule was simply this – “Never, ever mention the name of God – because God is not good.”

She was undeterred. When she eventually walked into his bedroom, her father was now 73 years old, was lying in bed, in frail condition.

He turned toward her and immediately began to weep as he said, “Aina,” he said, “I so sorry.” “It's all right, Papa,” she replied, “God took care of me.” The old man instantly stiffened and the tears stopped and he said, “God? God? God forgot us . . . God forgot us out there.” He turned his face toward the wall.

“Papa, you didn't go to Africa in vain. Mama didn't die in vain. God was at work through you. That little boy that accepted Christ grew up to win that whole village to Jesus Christ. Today there are 600 African people serving the Lord because you followed the call of God in your life. . . Papa, God had a plan all along . . . He had not forgotten you.” He turned back from facing the wall . . . they began to talk. By the end of that afternoon, the kindness of God had brought him back to repentance – and restoration and fellowship with his Savior, Jesus Christ.

A few weeks later, David Flood went home to heaven.

A few years later, Aggie and her husband were attending an evangelism conference in London. A report was given from the nation of Zaire by the superintendent of the national church, representing 110,000 believers.

He spoke eloquently about the spread of the gospel in his country. Afterwards Aggie couldn't help but go up and ask him if he'd ever heard of David and Svea Flood. “Yes madam,” he replied, “As a little boy, I used to sell them chickens and eggs twice a week. It was Svea Flood who led me to Christ.” They embraced for a long time.

He then said, “You must come to visit us – your mother is the most famous person in our church history.” And in time, Aggie did come – she was welcomed by cheering throngs of villagers.

Eventually she was taken to her mother's grave – with that white cross and the words, “Svea Flood” written there. She knelt in the soil to pray and give thanks to a good and patient God. That national church leader read from scripture, “Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.”^{ix}

There will come a day when everyone's story will make sense. For most, it will not be this side of heaven.

But for a few . . . answers come so that the grace of God can be magnified.

I can just see old Zacharias writing on a slate or parchment as his wife Elizabeth sat there with him at the kitchen table that night in their humble little farm house, “We've had 50 years of tears . . . we clung to the belief that God was worthy of worship – that God was good . . . just not so much to us.

Just think Elizabeth, you're disgrace will soon be gone . . . our covenant world will no longer look at us with suspicion of being under God's disapproval.

Now it's time to sing.

We're not going to have just any baby. Our son will be the one to introduce the son of God, the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world.

And that gospel – that good news – will not be delivered to one village alone – our little boy will introduce the gospel to our nation and it will eventually travel around the world.

You see, for this godly couple, life would be measured – life would be viewed in two sections;

before – and that was most of their lives for more than 80 years – and life after . . . after the angel came . . . and delivered the news of their soon to be delivered son.

That was the day when everything changed.

And the ministry of John would be one of conviction and repentance – it would become the foundation from his generation to ours for spiritual rest and forgiveness and joy.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/11/2011 by Stephen Davey.

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iv Cleon L. Rogers Jr. & Cleon L. Rogers III, The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament (Zondervan, 1998), p. 107

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vi Hughes, p. 25

vii Julia Neyman, "Do Evangelical Protestant Fathers Really Know Best?" USA Today (June 17, 2004), p. 9D

viii John Phillips, Exploring the Gospel of Luke (Kregel, 2005), p. 64

ix Adapted from Fresh Power, Jim Cymbala, (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids; 2001), p. 115