



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
3 Stanmore Bay Road,
Whangaparaoa, Auckland, N.Z.
www.ststephenswgp.org.nz

Sermon

Prophecies and Miracles

Luke 1:39-45, Hebrews 10:5-10, Micah 5:2-5a

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Through Advent, we have been reminded of Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah and we have seen something of the ministry of John the Baptist preparing the way for the Messiah. As we are now at the Sunday before Christmas, the story turns towards his birth.

Luke who wrote the gospel from which I read was a companion of Paul. He says in the first verses of the gospel that he has carefully investigated everything and written an orderly account based on eye-witness evidence.

He started in 1:5, with the conception of John the Baptist. Zechariah was a priest married to Elizabeth – both of them were descendants of Aaron the first High Priest. They were an upright couple, living in accordance with the Law of Moses. However, Elizabeth was barren – a great source of shame in their culture. They were both old.

Zechariah was serving in the temple as a priest. He was chosen by lot to offer the incense in the Holy Place. It is estimated that in those days there were about 20,000 priests in Israel. So any one priest would only be likely to be called upon to offer the incense once in his lifetime if that. In the midst of his special duty in the Holy Place, an angel appeared to him standing to the right of the altar of incense. You won't be surprised to know that Zechariah was very surprised and very afraid. That is normal in the Bible when someone sees an angel.

I have read several different accounts of people seeing angels in the modern times and often they report that they are very tall. But I think the fear is of the holy and supernatural.

As is also normal, the angel told him not to be afraid. He continued that Zechariah's prayer had been heard. Elizabeth would have a son and they were to call him John. John would be great in the sight of the Lord, he would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before birth. He would bring many Israelites back to God.

Zechariah doubted the message pointing out that he and his wife were well on in years. He wanted some basis to believe. At this the angel said [v19], "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and

I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."¹

So John was rendered mute. He finished his course of rostered duty and went home. Sure enough, soon Elizabeth was pregnant.

In the sixth month of her pregnancy, God had another message to convey. The same angel was sent to a girl in Nazareth. Mary was a virgin and engaged to be married. The message to her was again not to be afraid and that she had found favour with God. She would carry a child and give birth to a son. He would be great and called the Son of the Most High. He would have the throne of David as an eternal kingdom. In other words, he would be the Messiah and the Son of God.

Mary wondered aloud how this could be. She behaved differently from Zechariah. She didn't reject the message but found it hard to understand how it could be. Gabriel responded that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the child would be holy and called the Son of God. He also told her that her relative Elizabeth who was barren was having a child and was already in the 6th month of her pregnancy – "for nothing is impossible with God."

Mary submitted herself to the calling: [38] "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said."

Here we have this orderly account of the good news starting with the unashamedly supernatural. We encounter reports of an angel appearing and miraculous events: a man struck dumb – later to be restored to speech, a barren woman falling pregnant and a virgin conceiving. Luke is not fazed by these events, he doesn't hide them away as unbelievable. Christianity does involve the supernatural – entities beyond flesh and blood – not least God!

It is God the Holy Spirit who overshadowed Mary. The Holy Spirit will fill Zechariah's son while still in the womb. It is the Holy Spirit who fills Elizabeth, Mary and Zechariah as they bring out in prophecies. It is the Holy Spirit who still brings us to salvation and fills us when we are saved.

Can we choose to be like Mary rather than Zechariah when we encounter the things of God? Our challenges are most unlikely to be of the same magnitude as theirs, but when we are given a promise from scripture, can we choose to wonder and believe like Mary? It is too easy to speak out unbelief like Zechariah. Remember the words of Gabriel to Mary, "Nothing is impossible to God."

I have now reached the point where our reading starts. Very soon afterwards, she hurried off to visit Elizabeth – a journey of about 50-70 miles. Elizabeth was her relative. Elizabeth was of a priestly family of the tribe of Levi. Mary was of the tribe of Judah. Priests were not allowed to marry outside their tribe. So for them to be related a man of Judah must have married a woman of Elizabeth's family. So we know that Elizabeth was a maternal relative of Mary, possibly Mary's aunt. That means John and Jesus were cousins of some degree.

As Mary pregnant with Jesus came to Zechariah and Elizabeth's home, she greeted Elizabeth and there was a surprising response! Elizabeth's baby leapt inside her. For it to be significant it may have been the first kick. Not being as aware of such timings as some of you will be I checked and the first kick in a first pregnancy comes around 25 weeks – which is just under 6 months. Elizabeth was in her sixth month at the time of the annunciation. This was Elizabeth's first child and she would not be sure about a minor movement, but she described it as the baby leaping inside her. I think we can take it that it was a big kick!

¹ Luke 1:19-20

We are told that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. When the Bible tells of people are filled with the Spirit, there is usually an overflow of prophecy – speaking forth the praise of God. Elizabeth prophesied:

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" [42-45]

Without being told, Elizabeth knows about the baby. She calls the baby blessed. She the baby her Lord. She also declares Mary as blessed to have her role and to have believed the promises God gave her. What a huge encouragement for Mary – a young girl in a very vulnerable situation. How good God was to give Elizabeth this insight and words of encouragement to strengthen her.

Remember that Gabriel had told Zechariah that the baby would be filled with the Holy Spirit from inside the womb; Elizabeth says the baby leapt for joy at the presence of Mary and the unborn Jesus. It would seem most likely that it was at this moment that the baby John was filled with the Holy Spirit.

That should make us think about the humanness of the unborn. It also is a challenge to us if we think things of the Holy Spirit are for adults not children.

Luke chapter 1 continues to tell us of Mary's outpouring of prophetic praise in the song we call the Magnificat. She stayed with Elizabeth for three months before returning to Nazareth. Then we are told of the birth of the Elizabeth's baby and that when the father wrote a note to say his name should be John, his tongue was loosened and he could speak again. He, too, was filled with the Spirit and prophesied over the baby speaking of John's ministry to prepare the way for the Lord. He spoke of the ministry of salvation that God was about to release through the one who would be the dayspring from heaven.

Luke 1:68-70 "Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people. He has sent us a mighty Savior from the royal line of his servant David, just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago. [NLT]

We have been hearing about the incarnation, where the eternal Son of God took a body that he might be fully human. Today we are given two other views of the incarnation.

The Hebrews passage gives us the purpose. It takes Psalm 40 as applying to the Messiah. The author wrote when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me. ... Here I am to do your will. [Heb 10:5,9]" The writer continues, "And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

He is saying that the Son of God took a body for the express purpose of offering himself as a sacrifice to make us holy. He would fulfil the sacrificial function that animal sacrifices could not achieve. He would die for our sins and redeem us to himself.

Gabriel said the holy child was to be called Jesus which means God saves. Zechariah referred to Jesus as a mighty Saviour through whom God was visiting and redeeming his people.

The other passage from Micah identifies the place of the Messiah birth:

Micah 5:2 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

It was to be at Bethlehem. The same Bethlehem we heard about with Boaz and Ruth. The Bethlehem were David grew up. This is the passage that the scribes pointed to when Herod later asked them if

they knew were the Messiah would be born. The One who would be ruler over Israel whose origins are from ancient times – who else is that but the Ancient of Days?

In our readings today, we are lead up to a point in time six months before the birth of Jesus. Soon Mary carrying within her the Holy One would travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the home town of her clan. She would only do that because of the census decreed by the Emperor Augustus in Rome. Yet the timing of the birth and the census meant that the words of Micah 700 years before accurately foretold where the Messiah would be born.