

“Late Surprise”

a sermon by Eric A. Houghton

Scripture:

Luke 1: 67–79

Sunday, December 6, 2009

An Old Man’s Story:

I am an old man with a story to tell.

I lived long ago in the time of King Herod in Israel. My beautiful village, Ein Kerem, was in a valley five miles southwest of Jerusalem surrounded by tree-dotted hills. My family had lived there for generations. My parents were strict but loving and I grew up in a world of kindness and guidance.

I inherited the family house after my parents’ death and married the prettiest girl in the villages. Her name was Elizabeth, and she was kind and good. She was a descendant of the great Aaron, the first priest of Israel, the brother of Moses. My family was also descended from Aaron, so it was auspicious when our two families joined in marriage. She was a wonderful wife. We had good health and longevity. Yet for most of my adult life a dark cloud followed me.

The Dark Cloud:

Why the dark cloud? Because the Romans occupied our land, because we had no true freedom, and because King Herod was evil and manipulative.

But, mostly it was because Elizabeth and I had no children. In that day, to be childless was a stigma, a stain, a curse.

Every day of our marriage we prayed that God would send us a child, preferably a son. We prayed for months, then for years, then for decades, and **nothing** happened.

Perhaps some of you have earnestly prayed for something with disappointing results. This cast a darkness over my life. As an old man, I felt disappointed in my life.

My Life As a Priest

All male descendants of Aaron (about 20,000) were considered priests and were divided into 24 orders. My order, Abijah, comprising about 850 men. Twice a year we performed the sacrificial rites in the Temple complex for a week. I eagerly looked forward to these weeks in Jerusalem. Each time, one priest was chosen by lot for the privilege of offering the incense in the Temple. Such an honor was the culmination of a priest’s life. Because only two were chosen each year (out of 850 men), I realized I would likely never serve in this special capacity. This was another part of the darkness that followed me.

Return to Jerusalem

So, well advanced in years, I made another journey to the Temple with my brothers. However, to my great delight and surprise, I was chosen to be the incense server in the Lord's temple. For six days, early in the morning and at sunset, I entered the Temple alone to light the incense on the altar. This sweet fragrance was a holy offering to the Lord, Yahweh himself. Behind me in the Temple was the Holy of Holies that only the High Priest could enter once a year. Outside the Temple walls, the people gathered in the courts to sacrifice and pray; when I finished, I blessed the gathered crowd.

All week I alone offered this sweet sacrifice to Yahweh and was deeply moved by this privilege.

Heavenly Messenger

The last day of my service came. I had lighted the incense in the morning, and now was lighting it at the end of the day. I stood in the Temple knowing that I would never have this honor again. Suddenly on my right a towering light appeared and a voice spoke:

“Your prayer has been heard, and you and your wife shall have a son, you will name him John. He will be strong and full of the Spirit, and will go before the Lord himself and bring back many in Israel to God.”

Confused, I stammered, “how can this be, my wife and I are old?” The voice replied, “I am Gabriel, I stand before the Lord, what I have said will occur. Since you have doubted, you will be mute and unable to speak.” He vanished.

My heart beat wildly and my head spun – I had never experienced an angelic visitation. Finally, I composed myself, and went to bless the people. I raised my arms but could not speak. My vocal chords seemed paralyzed. So I dismissed them silently and returned to my village. Using a writing tablet, I tried to describe to Elizabeth what had happened.

Voiceless:

Now I had a new problem. Without a voice, I could not talk with those in the village, and soon felt very isolated. Perhaps some of you have felt voiceless, isolated from others. So my darkness intensified.

After some time, Elizabeth thought she was with a child, and in a few months she was clearly pregnant. She kept to herself during this period, except for a remarkable visit from her younger cousin, Mary, who was with child as well. However, that is a story for another time.

Our Miracle Child:

It came time for Elizabeth to give birth and the midwife delivered a healthy boy. My joy knew no bounds.

Eight days later, the priest and village elders gathered for the circumcising and naming ceremony. They asked Elizabeth our child's name, and she said, “John.” They were

amazed and said, “There is no John in your family, why is he not named for his father, Zechariah?”

They handed me the writing tablet, and I wrote, “his name is John.”

Speech Returns

Then my voice returned. I shouted, praised God, greeted everyone by name, and reveled in the use of my voice again.

Soon I began reciting words of prophecy (Luke 1:67–79) that spoke of the coming Messiah and words that spoke of my son:

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Immediately my darkness lifted and my isolation ended. As I looked at our child, love filled my heart, tempered with a sense of foreboding – for I knew his task would be difficult.

Surprises

God is a God of surprises – often mysterious surprises. Sometimes God’s surprises come early in life, and sometimes late in life. Sometimes they are pleasant and sometimes they are unpleasant. Sometimes the unpleasant surprises are resolved and sometimes they are not resolved in our lifetimes. God doesn’t promise us a paradise on this earth. He promises us his presence.

The ultimate surprise was the child born to my wife’s cousin Mary. Born in Bethlehem when our son was born, this Jesus of Nazareth was God himself. I know that you celebrate his advent during this season, as well you should.

Personal Advent

However, he also comes to us individually. We can each have our own advent. He is knocking now on the door of each of our hearts, seeking entry. He wants to dwell within, to change us, to clean us, and to reorient our minds. He wants to give us an eternal perspective and set us on the path to the eternal kingdom. This is our personal advent.

Remember the last words of my prophecy?

“He will give light to those who sit in darkness.”

We have all sat in darkness in our lives haven’t we?

“He will give light to those who sit in the shadow of death.”

Some of you may be sitting in that shadow today. All of us will sit in the shadow of death eventually.

“He will guide our feet into the way of peace.”

He leads us into his eternal peace.

It is the Advent Season. The surprise is that Christ comes to us personally. He wants to illuminate our lives, to chase away the dark shadows and to set us on the path of peace. He wants to hold our hand and lead us safely into his eternal kingdom. And that is the best news of all.

Shalom, and thank you for listening to an old man’s story.

Amen.

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