

Announcing The Forerunner

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 1st of December 2002. The preacher is Paul Dudley.

His sermon is entitled Announcing the Forerunner and is based on Luke chapter 1 verses 1 to 25.

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly order of Abjah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron and her name was Elizabeth.

They are our two main characters for tonight's passage. They have deep desires. Listen to them. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to the commandments and regulations of the Lord.

Here were a group of people, both Zechariah and Elizabeth, who had a deep desire to serve God. As a part of that deep desire to serve God, to fulfil his commandments, to live blameless lives, they would have known what the scriptures would have said.

[1 : 1 0] And they would have had a deep desire to see the Messiah come. They would have waited eagerly for this Messiah. The Old Testament spoke about it time and time again.

The Messiah, the one of King David's line, the one who would fulfil the promises to Abraham, that great king, the one who would bring forgiveness of sins.

This was their desire to see this great king come along. And they waited eagerly for him. But not only that, being people who knew their scriptures, they would have known the signs of when the Messiah was coming.

For there was one that would come before the Messiah, a forerunner. In Malachi, in the Old Testament, we have these words, See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.

And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple, the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. Indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. In chapter 4, Lo, I send you the prophet Elijah, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.

[2 : 2 0] He will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents, so they will not come and strike the land with a curse. There was one who had come before the Messiah.

Even the prophet Isaiah spoke of this. A voice cries out, In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, Make straight in the desert a highway for the Lord.

Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and every hill made low. The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Zachariah and Elizabeth were waiting for the forerunner, the one who had come before the great Messiah.

And they eagerly waited. This would have been a great heartfelt desire for them. They longed for it. But look at the other desire, heartfelt desire that they have.

In verse 7, But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. I'd like to announce tonight, not everyone knows, that Michelle is expecting our third child.

- [3 : 35] We're really excited about this. It's hopefully been born about May the 24th. We're really excited about this. But we're also very mindful of some very good friends of ours, same age, who haven't been able to have any children at all.
- I cannot begin to describe the pain they feel. These two couples have both had miscarriages. They have taken so long to fall pregnant.
- And the one chance they had, it miscarried. The pain of not being able to have children. It would have been a terrible heartache.
- A terrible heartache for them. For Elizabeth, not only would it have been a great heartache for her, for her it would have been a great disgrace also.
- A disgrace for her not to have any children. Here we see the two of them, both looking forward to when the great Messiah would come, but also Elizabeth with her desires of having children.
- [4 : 54] Well, in verses 8 through to 17, we see God's answer. We see God answers their prayer. We see there in verse 10 that the whole assembly is outside praying.
- I imagine for the coming of the Messiah. And God answers both of their long desires in a child. That child being named John.
- It happened at a very high moment for Zechariah. As we see here in verses 8, 9 and 10, we see there that he is a priest. And there was a particular time, a high moment for him, where he was chosen by lot for a once in a lifetime opportunity to go into the inner sanctuary and offer the sacrifices.
- To go into the inner sanctuary. You only had one chance of doing this. Once you were chosen by lot and you went in, that was it. This would have been a high moment, I imagine, for Zechariah.
- And it's at this moment that an angel appears to Zechariah. Look there in verse 12. We see there that he's utterly terrified and fear overwhelmed him.
- [6 : 09] But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son and you will name him John.
- Now listen to the next couple of verses. Listen to the echoes of the Old Testament passages I read a moment ago. You will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.
- He must never drink wine or strong drink. Even before his birth, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. The spirit and power of Elijah will go before him to turn the hearts of parents to their children and disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.
- For Zechariah, standing there, hearing these words from Gabriel, here we see the longing that he has desired for, the forerunner, the one that would prepare the way for the Messiah, would be fulfilled in the baby that his wife would carry, a baby named John.
- Here we see it, the forerunner. Here we see God breaking into history in a marvellous way, an incredible way. Here we see that it is all of God.
- [7 : 37] It is God's plan. Notice the way that Elizabeth is barren. Think back to your Old Testament. Think of the other great moments in salvation history when God worked in the people of Israel.
- Right back to Abraham. At that point there we see Sarah, barren, unable to bear children. Think of Hannah with Saul.
- Great moments in history. Women who are hopeless in terms of being able to have children. Yet God touches them and they are able to conceive.

Here we see God working in a powerful way in these women's lives, in these couples' lives. Here we see it is God's plan. God is the one who brings the fulfilment.

It is utterly God and His power. But look at the way that it is fulfilment here. Look at the way that we can trust God. He's not like a salesman that we see on television.

[8 : 48] Buy this gym equipment and you will have biceps that bulge. buy these new drugs and you will lose weight so quickly that people won't believe it.

And if you get these two things we'll give you a set of steak knives as well. Salesmen try to sell you these great things and they build them up but they never really come through.

They're never really able to fulfil their promises. But here we see a God who is able to fulfil His promises. Here we see the forerunner being announced to Zachariah God fulfilling His purposes.

We also see for this couple their deep desires being met. It's important at this point then to have a look at the different responses. First of Zachariah then of Elizabeth.

What is Zachariah's response to this great news that his wife is finally able to have a child but not only just any child the forerunner to the great Messiah.

[9 : 56] Have a look in verse 18. Zachariah said to the angel how will I know that this is so for I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years. What is his response?

You can't believe it. My wife fall pregnant. Can't you see how old we are? It's not going to happen.

How can it happen? Look at the distrust in the words of the angel that he has for the angel. Look at the words that the angel responds.

The angel replied I am Gabriel I stand in the presence of God and have been sent to speak to you and bring you this good news. But now because you did not believe my words which will be filled in their time you will become mute unable to speak until the day these things occur.

A short term punishment is brought upon Zachariah for his distrust. Let's contrast that with Elizabeth. Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zachariah and wondering at his delay in the sanctuary.

[11 : 11] When he came out he could not speak to them and they realised that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said this is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.

Can you feel the praise in her voice? The great joy that she has. Look at the two different responses there.

The contrast. That is Zachariah in not trusting in his great announcement of John but Elizabeth who responds in praise and joy.

It's interesting that Luke sets this up right at the very beginning of the book of Luke. The very first thing that we come to is we have this story and we see that as a big part of this story is the response of the two different characters.

[12 : 21] The contrast in the response to God's divine intervention. This response to God's divine intervention continues right throughout the book.

If they respond this way to John the forerunner what will happen when the Messiah comes? How will the people respond to the Messiah then?

Will they be like Zachariah? Oh I don't think he really is the Messiah. I don't think so. I just don't think he's the one. How can it be?

Or will they be full of praise? like Elizabeth? Can God be trusted? Can we trust God?

Will we respond like Zachariah or Elizabeth? Luke's aim is given right at the very beginning of this book. If you look there at the beginning of the chapter verse 1.

[13 : 24] He there tells about how he wants his readers in particular Theolophus to be certain of the things to come or things that have happened. He wants them to be absolutely certain.

Let me read it for you. Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word I too decided after investigating everything carefully from the very first to write an orderly account for you most excellent Theolophus so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

Luke wants people to be sure his readers to be utterly certain of Jesus and his claim as being Messiah. He wants his readers to be utterly certain that John was the forerunner.

We can see this even in this very passage. We can see the way that God is a God who promises but only promises but fulfills his promises.

We see it in a way that the angel promised that Elizabeth would fall pregnant and she does. Not only is there fulfillment in the passage but we see that the baby itself is a fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament.

[14 : 52] God can be trusted. He can be trusted to fulfill his promises. When we look at this passage we see two faithful servants of God who have deep desires.

One has a deep desire to see, well both have a desire to see the Messiah come but also the forerunner. We see them both having a desire of children.

We see that God's response to them is that John is born to them. We see these two desires meeting in this baby. We see their response to God's provision.

religion. And we see that we are to be like Elizabeth, people who trust. My daughter was really looking forward to the opening yesterday.

Like really looking forward to it. She woke up and before six o'clock in the morning had dressed herself, made her bed, she'd even tried to clean up the house a little bit, ready so that she could get ready for the opening ceremony of the building here.

[16 : 15] She just couldn't wait. She was given this promise of a kids concert, of meeting Ellie the elephant. She even made a present for Ellie the elephant.

She was so excited. She had a breakfast as soon as she could and while we were still trying to eat our breakfast, she asked when was the concert, when was the opening? We said it was after lunch.

How long before lunch, Mum? Is lunch ready yet? We were still eating breakfast. She eagerly had a desire.

She also has a desire for Christmas as well. She cuts out little magazines and sticks them on bits of paper like this. So we've got Christmas trees here and little sunglasses and Santa Claus and all the good things of Christmas that she likes.

She's really looking forward to Christmas. It's coming soon. Probably a little bit after lunch, but it's coming soon. As we come up towards Christmas, with all our deep desires, we need to stop and wonder at the birth of our Saviour again.

[17 : 29] we see that our Saviour, Jesus Christ, is the fulfilment of God's promises. We know, we can know for certain, that Jesus was this Messiah.

As we see today, the forerunner, John, has been announced. We can know for certain that Christ has come.

Let that have an impact on you. Let that have an impact on your life. Know for certain that God has sent His Son into this world.

Trust in His words. Trust in His promises. Because Christ will come again. And these deep desires, these long thirstings that we have deep inside, will be fulfilled on that great day where we will have eternal life with God forever.

Let me pray. Father, we pray that Your Spirit will enable us to be people who trust in Your words. Father, fill us with great certainty of Your promises, of Your goodness to us.

[18 : 51] May we be like Elizabeth, who sing out Your praises. We pray this in Your Son's name. Amen.