

Zacharias and Gabriel

“The angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid. Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.’” Luke 1:13, 14

The Christmas story in the gospel of Luke begins with the angel Gabriel promising the birth of John, who would later become known as John the Baptist, to Zacharias and Elizabeth. These were good people: “righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.”

But for all their goodness, there was a void in their lives. They had no children. And their hope was almost gone since they were so old.

Zacharias could not spend too much time thinking about this, for he was kept busy tending to his duties as a priest. One day, he entered the Holy Place alone, as dictated by the law. Then, an angel appeared to him. After the initial shock, the angel promised that he would have a son named John. The Holy Spirit would fill him, preparing the way for the Lord.

Zacharias was stunned. How could this be?

The angel then told Zacharias because he did not believe, he would be unable to speak until the fulfillment of this prophecy. Zacharias then returned home to Elizabeth, who soon became pregnant. A son was born, and when Zacharias indicated the name was to be John, he spoke again - thanking and praising God.

As the birth of John preceded and prepared the way for the Lord to be born, so spiritually it depicts how we are made ready for the Lord to be born in our lives.

The first thing we are told in the story is that Herod was king in the land. So depicts the presence of selfishness and worldliness as the background in our lives. Yet Zacharias and Elizabeth were known as law abiding citizens. So they depict the routines, the simple goods, we have in spite of not being very far in the process of regeneration. Regardless of our Herods, our lives conform to basic order. We work. We relax. We raise our children. We maintain our homes. We keep the Ten Commandments. Doing these things, and the simple satisfactions or delights derived from them, make a Zacharias and Elizabeth with us. They are orderly. They are useful.

But life is more than this simple external order. For if this is all we have, our lives are empty, barren, as Zacharias and Elizabeth did not have any children. Their lack of offspring indicates a void, an absence of any deep spiritual good.

Perhaps we sense this in our limited grasp of truth. Although we believe many true and good things from the Word, do we really understand the Lord’s message? Do we see how it all

fits together? Can we answer questions when someone asks us what we believe? Do we stammer and try to change the subject, or are we able to say what the New Church means to us? A lack of knowledge or of understanding is a barrenness in our lives. Yes, we can continue to live a basic existence, a good existence, but the Lord would have us go further.

Or perhaps we sense our barrenness in a lack of spiritual good. Although we are doing many good things, are our motives getting purer? Are we just going through the motions because we have been told or trained to? Or are we turning the focus of our lives more to others than to ourselves? A barrenness exists when the hellish motives remain, making our primary concerns the things of this world, such as how others think of us.

The fact that our lives are filled with employment, marriage, family, and household chores is not bad. In fact, it is like the temple duty that Zacharias had - is an honor, a privilege to do things for other people. Even though we may sense there is more to life.

And it was during the temple duty that Gabriel appeared to Zacharias. So the Lord comes to us. Gabriel's sudden appearance, where others could not see him, indicates that the Lord touches us deep within our minds, giving us a feeling we can expand our thoughts and deepen our feelings. His Divine presence stirs in us the vision of a spiritual existence – the vision of heaven, the vision which can bring eternal joy.

But Zacharias is afraid. So we are hesitant. Life may be routine, but at least it is easy and safe, or our lives as so busy it is hard to think of taking on anything else. We may think that anything more spiritual is not within our grasp.

Gabriel then tries to reassure Zacharias. He tells him his prayer has been answered - there will be a son, John, "and you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth."

This is the Lord's message to us also. Whatever may have happened in our lives, whatever mistakes we have made, whatever frustrations and limitations we may think we have, whatever our hectic routines, the Lord would answer our prayers. He would lead us to have a spiritual quality to our lives that will bring inner joy and gladness.

The Lord promises that a John can be born in our lives. Such a son is the Lord as the Word. Not just some fundamental concepts that will tell us the basic difference between good and evil. But an understanding, an appreciation, of Divine truth. A preparation is made for the birth of the Lord in our lives as we begin to comprehend the "whys" of religion. With reading, reflection, and discussions with others, our understanding of the Lord's purpose in creation can grow. We can come to a deeper appreciation of who the Lord is, what spiritual life can be, and find the kind of happiness He intends us to experience forever.

Opening our minds to John may not change the routines we have established, or shrink the problems we face. But adding such an offspring to our lives takes away our barrenness by giving us a perspective on what is eternally important. This is the promise that John "shall drink

neither wine nor strong drink," that is, we will not be intoxicated by false ideas - for the Lord would have us understand Him and the religious life He teaches.

And it was said that John would "turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God;" so the Lord's Word has the power to lead us in paths of genuine righteousness. As the ideas of truth from the Word infill and inspire our minds, we can challenge the evils which exist in our lives.

Yet the dubiousness remains. We doubt whether it is possible for us to have spiritual life born in our natural life. Like Zacharias, we see the problems. We think it may be hopeless, we are too old, too fixed in our ways. The Lord cannot create something new there. As the Psalmist said, "such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it" (139:6).

How does Gabriel respond? Does he reason with Zacharias? Does he argue? No. He simply states, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to you and bring you these glad tidings. But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time."

The Lord's response to our doubts is to remind us Who is speaking. When the Lord describes his purpose is a heaven from the human race, it is not a mild hope for a select few. He has the will and the power to accomplish it. We tend to forget that the Lord does not make idle promises. He does not ask the impossible of us. His goals, His ideals are attainable. And it is only when we recognize the power of the Lord, the truth of His Word, that we allow Him to prepare us for heaven.

We are left mute, unable to speak. It leaves us with a profound sense of our limitations, of the feebleness of any goals we might expound from ourselves. Such an inability to speak is not bad; rather, it is a humility in the presence of the Lord. With it we can continue with our lives, doing what we should, striving to follow the Lord's teachings.

So Zacharias completed his duty in the temple and then returned to his own house. There Elizabeth became pregnant. Through humility and a resolve to accept the Lord's ideals for us, enriched spiritual life is conceived. It is created within the regular patterns of our life - a growing spiritual essence as we listen to the Lord's Word and trust in His guidance - giving renewed meaning to existence, new purpose to life.

There is still much ahead. Mary would visit Elizabeth, indicating the promise of additional angelic life. Pressure would exist to deny the baby the name of John and call him after Zacharias, meaning the temptation we face to take credit for the good which is produced. But when we accept the promise of the birth of John, recognizing the spiritual life the Lord would have us strive for and embrace, the Lord can give us the strength to overcome all obstacles, producing even more joy and gladness.

For Zacharias and Elizabeth having John the Baptist prepares the way for all future development. As the Lord appears to us, blessing us with a vision of truth - the hopes which will lead to eternal happiness - we are made ready to receive the Lord' birth. Let us respond to the voice of the Gabriel, follow his lead, so that the we are truly ready for the Lord to come into our life more fully, and we receive the joy and gladness of heaven. Amen.

Lessons: Malachi 3:1-7; Luke 1:5-25; AE 724:7-9 (portions)

AE 724:7-9

John the Baptist was sent before to prepare the people for the reception of the Lord by baptism, because baptism represented and signified purification from evils and falsities, and also regeneration by the Lord by means of the Word. Unless this representation had preceded, the Lord could not have manifested Himself and have taught and lived in Judea and in Jerusalem, since the Lord was the God of heaven and earth under a human form, and He could not have been present with a nation that was in mere falsities in respect to doctrine and in mere evils in respect to life; consequently unless that nation had been prepared for the reception of the Lord by a representation of purification from falsities and evils by baptism, it would have been destroyed by diseases of every kind by the presence of the Divine Itself...

[8] The baptism of John could produce such an effect because the Jewish Church was a representative church, and all their conjunction with heaven was effected by representatives, as can be seen from the washings there commanded.... The washing and baptizing itself did not indeed purify them from falsities and evils, but only represented and thence signified purification from them; nevertheless, this was received in heaven as if they were themselves purified. It was thus that heaven was conjoined to the people of that church by means of the baptism of John; and when heaven was thus conjoined to them, the Lord, who was the God of heaven, could manifest Himself to them there, teach them, and abide among them.... This now was the reason why John was sent before to prepare a way for the Lord, and to prepare the people for Him.