

In the text that Dale read from Malachi, the community that Malachi addressed was an insignificant outpost of the Persian Empire. God's people in Judah had been promised elsewhere in Scripture that God would restore their community to greatness. And it had not happened when the prophet Malachi came onto the scene. They were a defeated and marginal group of exiles who were under the authority of a foreign ruler. Because these promises from God had not come true, the people of God were wondering if God had abandoned them and if God would ever restore them and their community.

In the midst of this economic and psychological wilderness, Malachi promises the people that a messenger is coming who will purify their land and the people. This messenger will then be a part of God's plan to restore the people and their faith.

We are now going to move into a reading from the gospel according to Luke. This is also a text about a messenger that God is going to provide for the people. But this is also a text about a delayed promise. It is a text about a privileged family who bore a huge embarrassment that they had to live with. This is the story about Elizabeth, Zechariah, and their baby named John.

This story is set also during a time when God's people were not exactly in great shape economically. This period is just before Judah is again conquered and the marvelous temple will be destroyed in 70 AD.

Read 1:1-4

Luke believes that he has something important to say. He also believes that he has an important slant to the story of the life of Christ and he must tell his version. It is widely assumed that Mark is the earliest of the recorded gospels but all of these 4 gospels that begin our New Testament were not written down until a good 30-40 years after the life of Jesus. The gospels were told orally for all of these years before they were written down.

Upon being exposed to Mark's version, Luke believes that Mark left some things out. And one of the things that Luke feels that Mark left out was the fascinating birth story of John.

Luke writes his account to a person named Theophilus. We don't know who this is. We are not even sure if it is a specific person or represents a group of people since his name means "friend of God."

Read 1:5-7

Priests were paid pretty well during this time. They were considered part of the cultural elite. Zechariah was a priest and he married Elizabeth who was a daughter of a priest. She did the culturally expected thing to do and she married a priest. So Zechariah and Elizabeth lived a pretty charmed life.

They were righteous and did everything that their faith told them they were supposed to do. They were good people who lived life correctly according to the laws of their faith. But there was one embarrassing thing for Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah and Elizabeth were unable to have children. They were barren.

Now we know today that there are lots of reasons why couples are unable to have children. There are medical issues that prevent pregnancy. There are environmental issues that can cause infertility in men and women. But even today, couples that have been together for some time but have not had children receive some cultural pressure that they are supposed to have children.

The way we treat couples without children today pales in comparison to what couples during Elizabeth and Zechariah's time period encountered. Because they were barren, it was assumed by their worshipping community that they were somehow being punished by God for something they had done. They had a stigma attached to them, a scarlet letter.

So they prayed to God and begged for God to remove this burden from them and allow them to have children. But this had not happened and they were now past child bearing age. God had not taken care of them.

Read 1:8-9

Priests usually only got one chance in their lifetime to enter the Temple and offer incense. This was his one big chance to carry out his biggest role as a priest. And I am sure he did not expect an angel to appear and interrupt his worship service.

Read 1:10-13

The meaning of the names of the characters in this story is important. Zechariah means "God has remembered." The name of Elizabeth means "My God's Oath" and the name of John means "God has shown favor."

Read 1:14-20

I read an interesting article this week in Atlantic Magazine entitled "Did Christianity Cause the Economic Crash?" In this article, the author researches several church pastors and churches who are part of the so-called prosperity gospel. These are pastors and preachers who preach that God will bless you financially if you have enough faith.

One particular pastor and church from Virginia was chronicled. The pastor pushes his lower income congregation to have faith and trust that God will provide the necessary financial means to help them buy their own home. Interestingly enough, until recently, this pastor also served as a loan officer at Countrywide, the firm that has been at the center of the failed loan industry for pushing people into homes they could not afford.

The article raised the question and asked if Christianity which says that we are to have faith and take financial risks did not lead people into financial ruin. The article interviewed some of the church members who had taken on these financial risks which did not pan out and now they are broke and in debt. The preacher's response to their plight was to say that financial success or ruin will show who the real Christians are.

That's an interesting message that seems to contradict what Zechariah and Elizabeth encountered. They did all the right things. They were very righteous. They were very faithful and dedicated their lives to serving God, but yet, they were barren.

But then something unexpected happens on the way to the church to carry out their religious responsibilities one day. An angel appears and announces that they will have a child. And this child will be a messenger to the greatest event in human history.

But there is one thing which I find interesting about Elizabeth and Zechariah having a child in their old age. Because of their advanced age, this meant that they would probably never see this promise fulfilled. Surely they would die before John would be the person that they were promised that he would be. Because they would not be around when he became an adult, they were to have great joy and gladness at his birth. They were to believe in a promise that they were most likely never to see.

And, sure enough, Elizabeth eventually gives birth to this child. And he becomes the guy who comes running out of the wilderness to announce to the people that a Savior is coming.

Throughout the pages of the Bible, we see story after story where God's messengers make promises about God transforming the world. But over and over in the Bible we see examples of where the people of God are not removed from difficulties but that they face troubling times over and over again.

There are two ways to view time in the Bible. One way to view time is with the Greek word chronos. Chronos means time like we know time in our culture. Time we keep on a watch. The time we find on our cell phone. What time is it? Right now it is 10:45 am on a Sunday morning.

And when we read of God's promises or trust in God's promises we think that these promises are going to be fulfilled in our chronos time that we have set up. Do you remember how much anxiety people preached at the end of 1999 because of our chronos time? I understand that there is another prediction of end times coming up for the year 2012. There are lots of people who spend lots of time talking about how God is going to do such and such at this particular chronos time.

But chronos is not the only time which the Greeks understood. They also talked about kairos time. And kairos time is God's time. God's time is not our time. Kairos is God's time.

Whenever we hear someone tell us that God is going to bless us if we are righteous and God is going to bless us with material things or that God is going to bless us in ways that we can see something we can somehow touch, I think that is a complete misunderstanding of the gospel. That is a dependence on chronos time.

But when we trust God to deliver even when we see no tangible evidence of that deliverance, then we are placing our trust in the kairos time of God.

So are we going to place our trust in this kind of time (point to watch)?

Are we going to place evidence of God's presence on this dollar bill?

Or are we going to place our trust in God's deliverance in a kairos time that we probably don't have a clue how to see? AMEN.

-Rosen, Hanna, "Did Christianity Cause the Crash?" The Atlantic, Dec. 2009 and found at <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200912/rosin-prosperity-gospel>

-Text: Malachi 3: 1-4 and Luke 1:1-20

-Given: December 4, 2009 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)