

Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John the Baptist: Preparing the Way for Jesus

DARRELL DELANEY

Advent is a time where we are all preparing for the arrival of Jesus. Since the fall of humanity, God has been setting up the plan to redeem all things through his Son, and we are almost to the time of his birth. Before that momentous occasion, God had to prepare the way, and that is what this episode is all about. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are in part two of our five-part Advent series; and in the first episode, we talked about the Magi—these individuals that we have seen to come from the Far East and have a twist on what Matthew was trying to actually demonstrate in his book, that they were the ones who were coming from foreign nations, but they found out about the Messiah.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that was Matthew's way of saying, we said in the previous program, that Jesus came for everybody, not just Israel...not just Jews; and the Magi being those foreigners from the Far East, we welcome them in our manger scenes today, but the Jews back then wouldn't have; but that was a sign of the universality of the gospel.

Now, we started with the Magi because their trip was the longest. They probably set out long before; but now we are going to get a little closer to the actual time of Jesus' birth, and we are going to look at some of the characters who run up to that; and today, it is going to be Zechariah and Elizabeth.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, we had this 30,000-foot, coming from far away lands; and now we are zooming right in to one family; and so, we pick up where Zechariah is serving before the Lord as prophet and priest, and he does his priestly duties there; and his wife Elizabeth is there with him; and that is where Luke picks up the intro.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Luke wrote for someone named Theophilus...it literally means lover of God...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It probably was a real person...it might have been a stand-in...but one of the things Luke makes clear is that he did a lot of research. He wasn't a disciple. We think he was a doctor who joined the gospel cause later in the book of Acts. So, he wasn't a firsthand witness to anything, but he did a lot of research, and I think he did a lot of interviews. So, Luke, in his first two chapters, gives us all these background stories nobody else tells us about...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Including the parents of John the Baptist. So, this is one of the first stories we get right in Luke Chapter 1.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, picking up at verse 5, it reads: In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶Both of them were righteous in the sight of the God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. ⁸Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. ¹¹Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and gripped with fear. ¹³But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁸Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." ¹⁹The angel said to him, "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. ²⁰And 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 appointed time." And so, then Zechariah comes out of the temple; he is unable to speak, but very soon after this, sure enough, his wife Elizabeth becomes pregnant with a child. So, this is something we have seen elsewhere in the Bible...an older couple...it started with Abraham and Sarah, right? An older couple who had never before been able to have a child because of some infertility issues...never could have a child, and then a child is promised, and every time that happens in the Bible, it is a very special child.

DARRELL DELANEY

And it is really crazy to think about how the Lord is always intervening in impossible situations to bring glory to his name; and these are matriarchs in Israel's history: Sarai, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah; they have all been through these different things where God has done something miraculous, even if he doesn't always change it for the people who are having struggles...and maybe you are having struggles with these things; it is not your fault; it is this issue that is really challenging, that even though it may or may not happen at that moment, it doesn't mean that God isn't able to...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly right.

DARRELL DELANEY

Speak to situations like that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, Zechariah is a priest. He enters...only one person at a time can enter the holiest part of the temple...that is why they choose somebody by lot, because you don't want to contaminate the holiness; so, one at a time, please...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One once a year, please. You would think that, you know, you are in the temple, it wouldn't be that surprising to see an angel, but I think, you know, if I go to church on Sunday...I am in church...but if I see an angel, I am going to be pretty surprised...

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes!

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, he is in the temple...he is in a holy spot...you might think: Well, that is as likely a spot as any to see an angel, but when he does see one, he is terrified, as everybody who ever sees an angel is. That is why angels...their first words are always: Don't be afraid...

DARRELL DELANEY

Fear not!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

He sees the angel while he is actually serving the Lord, and doing what he knows to do...what he is called to do...what he has been trained to do. It is really a powerful point there, because I was thinking about this. Me and our family, when we are at home, we have this shoebox, and in the shoebox, we put prayers, but on the cover of the box we put: FJTD: for Jesus to do. So, we put the things that we feel are bigger than us and harder than us and more impossible than us in the box, and then we go about doing what we can do and what God has called us to do; and it is really interesting how God intervened with something that was impossible in the situation where she is childless, but then he did it while Zechariah was doing what he was called to do, and that could be a lesson for us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One part of the story that has always confused me a little bit...so, if we jump ahead just a little bit in Luke, we are going to get this same angel, Gabriel, visiting Mary; and Gabriel says: You are going to have a child; and Mary says: How can this be? I am a virgin. And to Mary, Gabriel says: Oh, well, this is how it's going to go, Mary. It is going to be fine. Zechariah asks a perfectly logical question, too: How can this be? We are old. And Gabriel is mad, and says: Well, you're not going to talk for nine months, dude! It is like, wow, Mary got a lot nicer response than Zechariah. Not quite sure what explains that, but either way, he was going to be quiet for nine whole months; but during those nine months, he is going to see that God is going to do the impossible; and we are going to pick up on that story and continue to see what happens next for Zechariah and Elizabeth. So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*. You will hear that we just got done talking about how Zechariah didn't believe what the angel was saying, and sometimes we give him a bad rap for that doubt situation, but I think the point is that when we see "impossible," God says: I'm possible. Because there is nothing too hard for God; and we are going to jump right back into these passages.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Luke 1:57: When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. ⁵⁹On the eighth day they

came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah,⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”⁶¹ They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child.⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.”⁶⁴ Immediately his (Zechariah’s) mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God.⁶⁵ All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things.⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, Zechariah was mute at the time. So, he really couldn’t explain all the things that he saw or what he was thinking about until he got a tablet to write the name, but it is family tradition, since this is a patriarchal society, and the firstborn son...why not name him after his father?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Zechariah Jr. That is how you did it. Nobody chose a different name. I like in this passage...by the way, this is just an aside...but Zechariah...God had closed his mouth...he just couldn’t speak; but I like in verse 62 how they started making signs...they started making signs like he is deaf. It is like, he is not deaf. If you want to ask him what to name your child, just ask him. But we always kind of treat people that way; but be that as it may, as soon as Zechariah fulfills what God asked him to do, to signal this child’s uniqueness by giving him a unique name, immediately his mouth was opened; and Darrell, it is wonderful that nine months, okay? That is a long time not to be able to speak. It is hard to imagine...nine months...and what is the first thing out of his mouth? Praise.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He starts praising God. He doesn’t curse God for keeping him silent for nine months. He doesn’t ask: Why, God, did I have to be silent? No; praise. What a great thing!

DARRELL DELANEY

I think it is a good note for us to follow, too. Sometimes there are things that are happening that are beyond our control. Sometimes there are things that are happening that are difficult, but worship is always an appropriate response to God, and then praise to his name because, I mean, literally John’s name means *grace*. It means that it is grace by God; and so, names are always going to be important in scripture, and when God names something or someone, it is going to be very powerful.

I know I have this hobby where I like to walk up to people, or when I am checking out at the store, I will say: Do you know what your name means? If they don’t know, and I know, then I will tell them what their name means. What is your name? My name is Jessica. Okay, it means *wealthy one*. So, living the wealth of the love of God; living the wealth of his grace and mercy in your life; have a blessed day. I just kind of leave people with that because I feel like it adds value to you if you know what your name means. It’s a beautiful thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and names in scripture are never just handles. I mean, that is how we kind of treat them. It is just my handle. I am Scott; you are Darrell; but names were always symbolic and important, and as you said, you know, to be graced by God as John was, was very, very vital.

We talked, too, about how Zechariah, upon exiting his nine months of enforced silence, began to sing. If we were to read a little bit further in this chapter, Zechariah sings a whole song.

DARRELL DELANEY

A prophetic song.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it is like Psalm 151 or something. A beautiful, beautiful prophetic song, and I have often thought to myself, Darrell, well, what do you do when you cannot talk for nine months? Well, you could stew about it, you could be mad about it, you know, whatever; you could make a list of things that you want to say to your wife as soon as you can talk again. What Zechariah did was compose a psalm. He used that long period of enforced silence for something productive; and the things he sings, I think we could dare to say, Darrell, were revealed to him by God's Spirit.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because in the temple that day, he was confused; he didn't know what was going on; he expressed doubt; but now, in that beautiful song, he says of his son John: You are going to be preparing the way. The Morning Star is going to arise and shine on us from heaven; and you, my son, are going to be the privileged one to prepare the way. So, he composed a psalm during his nine months of silence, and the psalm was prophetic, pointing forward to what John would do, and what Jesus would do.

DARRELL DELANEY

That is literally the essence of what paving the way idea is in this episode; and I also thought that it was really powerful how when everyone was around...the people were around him and Elizabeth...they were like: What is his name going to be? Of course, it is going to be Zechariah Jr., and she says: No; his name is going to be John. Their response: There is no one among your relatives who has that name. I think that one sticks out to me because, like God is actually doing something that is unprecedented. He is doing something that is going to create a new way and a new opportunity for his name to be glorified. There are people who I know who are the first ones to maybe graduate from college or the first ones to, you know, overcome struggles and addictions in their families, and they have gone a way that no one else has gone, and it is because of God's grace and mercy. If that is you, then you know you are blessed because God did it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, John...that is his name...but he is closely associated...and the angel...we saw this in the previous segment of the program, Darrell...the angel in the temple said that he is going to be kind of like Elijah, right? And Jesus will say that later. You know, there was a belief in Israel that Elijah somehow would return...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right before the Messiah came, right? And John is that Elijah. In fact, after the Transfiguration, Jesus would say people waited for Elijah and that was John...John was Elijah; and who was Elijah? Well, he was the prophet who called Israel back during the time of King Ahab...during the time of great apostasy and grave sin, God sent Elijah to call people back to God, to get them away from the cult of the Baal.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And idolatry; and that is what John the Baptist is. He is going to be in the tradition of Elijah to call Israel back to its better self as a preparation for the ultimate Messiah, whose way John was going to be preparing.

DARRELL DELANEY

The prophet's role is always going to be: Hey, let us get back to what God commanded us to do; hey, let us repent and turn back to God, and remember his promises and remember his faithfulness in our lives; and so, John literally does that his whole ministry; and there were a couple of times where he had to tell them: I am not the Messiah...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

I am not Elijah; I am not the prophet, but I point to the one who I cannot untie his shoes. There he is; there is the Lamb of God. That is Jesus, and it is really important for us to remember his role in the scriptures.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and he made clear. He said: I am not the Bridegroom; I am the best man, you know; I am the best man at this wedding.

So, the people all went home after this amazing thing, where they had given the name of John, and Luke says people talked about it all over the hillsides. I mean, it was up and down the streets and alleys. People were: Who is this child going to be? And when John finally grew up, he was amazing. He was the most powerful preacher of his generation. John was so much flashier than Jesus, that all the way into the book of Acts, you know, years after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, the Apostles were still running into churches that were titled: The Church of the Messiah—John the Baptist, right? There were still people who only knew John's baptism, who thought John was the Messiah. That is how powerful John would be; but he himself made clear: Look, I must decrease so he may increase. That was his whole role.

Well, as we wrap up this episode, let's think of some of the practical implications of this story, and some of the wider resonances in the Bible. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

DARRELL DELANEY

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are coming to the end of this program, the second in a five-part Advent and Christmas series, looking at some of the main characters who surrounded the nativity—the Advent—the arrival of Jesus at Christmas; and in this episode, we have looked principally at the parents of John the Baptist: Zechariah and Elizabeth; and we just were noting, Darrell, that John the Baptist was going to be a prophet in the tradition of Elijah; someone to call the people back to God...call the people back to their best selves, and that was all in preparation for the Messiah.

DARRELL DELANEY

And we know that from when we read the gospels that we see John the Baptist is definitely a force to be reckoned with. He is the voice crying out in the wilderness; he is the one turning them back to God; but he is also Jesus' cousin because it mentions that Elizabeth and Mary are related, and so it is really interesting to see that even John leaps in the womb when he...fast-forward...and he hears about the fact that Mary is also pregnant, because the Messiah is coming in real time at that point. So, it is really powerful to see that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is wonderful to see that the arrival—the advent of the Messiah—was not haphazard. it didn't just...God was preparing the way, Darrell...he was preparing the way; and John the Baptist is so powerful, all four gospels include him: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; and as the great preacher Fred Craddock once said: It is pretty clear you cannot get to Jesus without going through John. You have to go through John; his baptism of repentance to prepare people for Jesus' ultimate baptism unto new life.

DARRELL DELANEY

What we have seen from these stories is that God loves the world so much that he has been setting up this redemptive plan to help us; and if we think about Paul's writings, and specifically in Romans, he talks a lot about the fact that God does something about our sinful situation that actually separates us from God. In Romans 5 we read:

⁶You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

So, we see that Paul is making us remember the fact that it needed to be a divine intervention to fix the relationship with God, and John paved the way with the baptism of repentance, and we still are called to repent to this day to get back to what God has called us to be, and offered it to his family as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I liked how Paul in Romans 5:6 said: You see, at just the right time...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is all...we often talk sometimes about the two different kinds of time: *chronos* time...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now, that is the time...

DARRELL DELANEY

Tick tock.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, tick tock on the clock; and *kairos* time, which is a different kind of time. That is a different time...a time of appropriateness...

DARRELL DELANEY

The moment.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The moment...the right moment. God had been planning ever since Genesis to send this savior; and so, indeed, we could go all the way back to Genesis in the chapter of the fall, where God is talking to the serpent who had tempted Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit:

¹⁴So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. ¹⁵And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

Those verses there have a very, very long theological term: *protoevangelium*, which means the preview...sort of the first gospel...the pre-gospel. This is where the Messiah is promised. The dust from the first sin has not even settled yet, and God says: I've got a plan.

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I've got a plan. If you think of history as a giant chessboard, God had been moving his pieces around; and now, the second to the last piece to move is John the Baptist.

DARRELL DELANEY

He is two hundred moves ahead of us as well, with his divine wisdom; and that word *enmity*, that is right there. That is where the actual prophesy about Christ is happening, right there in the whole "crush your head" thing. It is really important to see that even though humanity has dropped the ball, so to speak, here comes the grace of God to redeem it, literally, in the same book that it happened in; and that promise is really powerful. But what is also really powerful is that...and we mentioned this when we talked in the other episode about Matthew, how this is kind of a bookend, and how you talk about the Advent that we are preparing for in this season, but there is also a second advent coming in the future that we are looking forward to.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is a reason why, in the tradition of the Church, if you really follow traditional, assigned biblical readings for the season of Advent, the first one in Advent is usually Jesus in the Olivet discourses at the end of his ministry, just before he gets arrested, where Jesus is talking about the end times...what we call the end times: The Second Coming—the Parousia—when the presence of Christ returns to the earth; and Advent begins there because, as you said, we are between two advents. We spend most of our time focused on Bethlehem...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But we are supposed to, in the Church, think about the second advent, which hasn't happened yet; and in fact, if the second advent never happens, the first advent isn't worth celebrating either, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The only good reason to celebrate the nativity of Jesus in Bethlehem is if he is coming back; and we see that at the end of the Bible, in Revelation 21.

DARRELL DELANEY

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." And we long for that day, don't we, Scott?

SCOTT HOEZEE

We do. No more racism, no more cancer, no more political partisanship and red and blue that cannot get along, no more Alzheimer's; all the things that bring tears to our eyes will be eliminated in God's good order; and what we get here...you talk about bookending...the Bible begins in Genesis with God living with Adam and Eve, and they mess up and they have to part ways; so, God has been trying to get closer all along to restore that relationship. We had the tabernacle where God lived in the Holy of Holies; the temple; and God kept getting closer until the living temple of Jesus Christ came to this earth; and now, as John foresaw in Revelation 21, the dwelling of God is with us. John the Baptist prepared the way for that, thanks be to God. Thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us again next time as we study the angel Gabriel's announcement of Jesus' birth and Mary's reaction. Connect with us now at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

DARRELL DELANEY

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