



I have been around a long time. But the term “selfie” has only been around for 10 years. What is a selfie? It’s really a digital self-portrait. What do we do with selfies? Usually we post them on our social media. Why do we post selfies? That’s a really good question. Is it because we enjoy when others look at pictures of us? There is something kind of fun about selfies. But also I can see something kind of off for people who continually crank out selfie after selfie for their followers and friends. I’m not a big selfie fan, but I have to admit having a Selfie Stick for a family Thanksgiving picture was a lot easier than setting up a tripod and figuring out the timer delay on our camera!

Today we begin a new series for Christmas called “Christmas Selfies: Who is at the center of my Christmas?” We are going to look at four Biblical characters from their point of view. We are going to see how their first Christmas impacted their lives. They didn’t have social media to post their selfies in New Testament times, but their accounts have been posted in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. And their selfies have been shared with billions in that last two millennia. This week we are going to look at an older married couple. Their selfie was taken a little over a year before Christ was born. The couple is Zechariah and Elizabeth. Let’s learn from them as we prepare for our Christmas.

God Breaks Through in Unexpected Ways

This beautiful story tells us about the ways of God. It tells us we need to understand. Not just understand; we need to expect. We need to expect God to break through in unexpected ways in our own lives as well as throughout all the nations and peoples of the world.

Do you really believe God breaks through in unexpected ways? I know that is hard to believe sometimes. But we need to fight that doubt. We need to believe the scriptures. We need to trust in the promises. It’s the way we prepare for Christmas. It’s the way of hope. And it’s through our hope that we help others who are hopeless find hope this Christmas.

I found as I went through this passage that it was fascinating to see how God unfolds his plan to send his Son. The history leading up to Luke chapter 1 was 400 years of silence. The nation of Israel, which always had kings and priests and prophets who were connecting the people to God had experienced 400 years of silence. To put 400 years in perspective—that’s present day back to before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock—that was 400 years of losing hope about the redemption of their nation and

the promise of the Messiah. Then all of a sudden, God’s plan begins to break open and unfold through very unexpected ways to very un-expecting people. Let’s pick up the story in Luke chapter 1 verse 5.

Zechariah and Elizabeth Were in Need of a Breakthrough

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. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old (verses 5-7).

Zechariah was at that time one of about 18,000 priests living in the nation of Israel. That’s a lot of priests. You couldn’t throw a rock without hitting a priest in Israel. These priests were divided up into 24 divisions, and they were spread out across the countryside, and most of them worked small farms or flocks and were poor. Elizabeth was also in the family. In fact she was a “PK,” a priest’s kid, a descendant of Aaron, one of the most famous priests, who served alongside Moses almost 2000 years before.

Luke tells us two things about Zechariah and Elizabeth. First, they were following the Lord’s commands blamelessly. Not that they were without sin, but they lived righteous lives and were examples of genuine faith unlike so many of the priests of Jesus’ day. Luke identifying them as righteous is significant because of the other thing he tells us about them: Zechariah and Elizabeth had no children. Elizabeth was unable to conceive and she was old so the days of hoping for a child were long over. It’s important that we know that in those days if a woman couldn’t conceive it was considered a sin problem, a spiritual problem, not a physical problem. A woman who was unable to conceive was a disgraced woman. In essence, Elizabeth was forced to walk through life with a sign hung around her neck that read “sinner.”

You could imagine people in her village saying, “Wow, she looks righteous and appears blameless, but for her to not bear Zechariah children must mean there is a dark sin secret in her life.” People viewed this as a lack of the goodness of God in her life. What a terrible burden to carry. It makes you wonder if her blameless reputation was because she continued to live and serve God faithfully without becoming bitter about it all.

I'm sure there are many of us here today who have something in our lives that rightly or wrongly bring disgrace. It could be something we've done in the past. It could be an addiction we battle every day, a divorce, a firing, being abandoned. Or maybe it's the inability to have kids of your own. Rightly or wrongly it could be hundreds of different things that feel for us like a sign hanging around our necks for all to see. I think those of us who can relate to Elizabeth need to be reminded as we prepare for Christmas that God breaks through in unexpected ways.

And for Zechariah, he doesn't live with the same stigma. For him, it's living with the deep disappointment of having no child to carry on the family name. Maybe you can relate to him if you've been ambushed by some tragedy or disappointment that you never could have expected. You wonder if you will ever be able to really enjoy life again. This takes me to all the people affected by the horrible terrorist attack in San Bernardino who are trying to pick up the pieces of their lives and community and grieve and heal and move on. We need to pray for God to break through in unexpected ways. Many in that community ask for our prayers.

God Breaks Through in His Own Timing

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside (verses 8-10).

As one of the 18,000 priests Zechariah and his particular division of priests were called up and were given the responsibilities for the temple in Jerusalem two times per year. So for two weeks out of every year Zechariah made his regular journey into Jerusalem to fulfill his priestly duties. As an old man he had his responsibilities down pat. They probably had a priest's best practice manual that he had long ago memorized. He had performed his duties probably 100 times by now. It had become a routine to him.

But this time, it was different. God was about to break through. Here is how it went down. Every week the priests on duty cast lots to see who would get the special duty and honor that week to enter the Holy Place and light the incense and offer intercessory prayer for the people. Typically a priest hoped for one time in their life to get this honor. Many never got the honor.

Zechariah is probably thinking, "Out of 18,000 priests what is my chance of being the one chosen for the special duty? I never win these things." But on that day, the old man Zechariah got his chance of a lifetime. No doubt he was surprised. No doubt he was excited. No doubt if he could have he would have texted Elizabeth. No doubt if he could have he would have snapped a selfie in front of the temple and posted it with the caption, "Guess whose turn it is today?".

But then reality hits; this is a big responsibility. I'm sure the night before he opened up the manual to brush up. "Okay, so I take with me the incense and some of the some red hot coals from the brazen altar where the Lamb is being sacrificed for the sins of our people, and I am to put the coals on the Golden Altar of incense and I put the incense on the coals and I pray for the redemption of Israel and for the coming Messiah.

"So the room is laid out like this. To the left is the table of showbread, to the right is the lamp stand. Good thing, the room has no windows so it will be hard to see. And straight ahead just this side of the curtain leading into the Holy of Holies is the golden altar of incense. It's coming back to me now. In Psalm 141:2 the psalmist said, 'May my prayer be set before you like incense.' This is it. This is what I live for. Tomorrow will be the pinnacle experience of my priest career. I just need to take this in. I wish Elizabeth was with me for this." Zechariah was a man who walked with God. He had to be thinking, Why now God? Why now? After 400 years, God's perfect timing led to this moment of action.

So the day arrives. Zechariah like all the priests before him puts on the special priestly robe for the special occasion. He walks through the courtyard. He sees all the people waiting for him outside the temple, waiting to catch a glimpse of the one who was going to intercede for them and offer prayers for them to God. As he gets closer he sees the faces of his fellow priests, no doubt some who have already experienced what he is about to experience, that he will enjoy talking to later. He has now become part of their fraternity. He sees the faces of the others, those who are wishing that next time will be their time. He passes the great brazen altar and smells the sacrificed lamb, sacrificed for the sins of his people and he picks out his red hot coals from the fire on the altar.

Then he approaches the opening into the holy place. He feels all the people's eyes boring into the back of his head as he enters the holy place and disappears from their view. Zechariah looks up and looks forward and takes it all in. There is the showbread table to the left. There is the lamp stand to the right, and there straight in front of him is the golden altar at the far end of the room right up against the thick curtain that separates the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. He pours the burning coals on the altar. Then he removes the incense from his priest pouch and puts it on the coals, and immediately smoke and a sweet aroma fill the small room. Zechariah begins his priestly prayer for the nation of Israel, for their redemption, and for the coming Messiah.

After praying, he looks up to take it all in. There it was just like the sketches in the manual: The showbread table, the altar of incense, the brightly shining man like figure and the lamp stand. Man-like figure? Wait! What? No one was in here when I entered. The priest manual didn't say anything about a man-like

figure to the right of the altar of incense. No one told me about this! This is unexpected!

God Breaks Through with Unexpected Messengers

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard (verses 11-13a).

So the angel, knowing this is out of the ordinary, calms Zechariah down and says to him, "Your prayer has been heard." The tense Luke uses means that the angel declared that a prayer he has just prayed has been heard. The angel is referring to the prayer that Zechariah had just prayed in the Holy Place for the redemption of Israel and the Messiah to come. Zechariah could have never imagined that within the answer to his prayer for Israel would be found an answer to another prayer he and Elizabeth had likely stopped praying years before. Zechariah and Elizabeth had no doubt prayed years ago for a child of their own. We find out here that God had not forgotten, but it sure took him a while to answer it.

God Breaks Through with Unexpected Messages of Hope

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for 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. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And 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" (verses 13b-17).

Zechariah has long tossed aside the priest manual by this time. The poor old fella who had just gone in to light some incense and pray tries to take all this in. The angel is announcing that God has broken through the silence and is working in the nation of Israel and God is working in the whole world, and God is bringing to you your messiah and God is including you and your family in his answer. Your 80-year-old wife will give you a son and you will name him John which means Jehovah is gracious. You and she will absolutely adore your baby boy. He will be a joy and delight to you. And because this boy is set apart for a great purpose I want you to steer him clear of wine and fermented drink so that everyone will understand that what fills him is the power of the Holy Spirit, and that power will be in him even before he is born.

And John will grow to be a man great in the sight of the Lord and his gifts and power will remind people of Elijah. When he

preaches, families will be healed, people will repent of their sins, many will recognize their foolishness and seek the true wisdom that only comes from God. And the nation will be prepared for this Jesus who is coming. Got that Zechariah? God is breaking through with a message of hope! What do you think about that?

The angel stops and waits and Zechariah continues to process this. Then Zechariah opens his mouth to speak, and it will be the last thing he speaks for nine months.

God Breaks Through with Unexpected Lessons that Change Hearts

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." The 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. And 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" (verses 18-20).

Zechariah, don't you know who you are talking to? Don't you know where I have been hanging out? Okay I'll give you a sign. He picks up his remote and pushes the mute button and says, "You'll be unable to speak until my promise is fulfilled." So Zechariah has been muted. In a moment we're also going to see what nine months of silent reflection does to his heart. But while this was going on inside the Holy Place, what is going on outside in the temple courts?

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak (verses 21-22).

This is just funny to me. The people are shouting to him, "Zechariah, Zechariah, what happened in there? Why can't you talk? Did God speak? What did he say?" And poor Zechariah can't tell them so he tries to act it out like Charades. Then after his week of service is done, he goes home and tries to do sign language to his lovely wife. I can imagine that first night as they're getting ready for bed. Zechariah gets that look in his eye, that look that she hasn't seen in a long time! Imagine him trying to sign his intentions. Scripture spares us the details, it just says this:

God Breaks Through with Unexpected Joy and Blessing

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people" (verses 23-25).

I think many of us can relate to Zechariah. He knew what was expected and he did what was expected. He is a person who has known the Lord for a long time. He goes to church, gives his tithes, attends a community group, goes on mission trips, prays before meals, reads his Bible. But Zechariah wasn't prepared for Christmas because he wasn't prepared for God to break through in unexpected ways. It reminds me that it really doesn't matter how long you've known God, or how well you've obeyed God, there is always room for unexpected lessons and growth. God is committed to stretch and grow his people of faith.

So for nine months God stretched him and grew him. Have you ever wondered about the first words that Zechariah spoke after John was born and God unmuted him? If you want to know read Luke 1:67-80 as you personally prepare for Christmas. This reveals the beautiful work God did in his heart as he remained silent for nine months. It's called Zechariah's Song and it is love and thankfulness pouring out of him for us to read and be encouraged.

How about us? Do you believe God is able to step into your life and bring joy and blessing where there has been disgrace and disappointment? That is what the coming of Christ really means to us. Some of us have become so cynical, so jaded by life that we no longer believe that God is at work to bless us. But God has some unexpected ways of getting through to us.

James Dobson relates a story of an elderly woman named Stella Thornhope who was struggling with her first Christmas alone. Her husband had died just a few months prior because of a slow-developing cancer. Now, several days before Christmas, she was almost snowed in by a brutal weather system. She felt terribly alone, so much so that she decided she was not going to decorate for Christmas. Late that afternoon, the doorbell rang, and there was a delivery boy with a box.

He said, "Mrs. Thornhope?" She nodded. He said, "Would you sign here?" She invited him to step inside and closed the door to get away from the cold. She signed the paper and said, "What's in the box?" The young man laughed and opened up the flap, and inside was a little puppy, a golden retriever. The delivery boy picked up the squirming pup and explained, "This is for you, Ma'am. He's 6 weeks old and completely housebroken." The

young puppy began to wiggle in happiness at being released from captivity.

"Who sent this?" Mrs. Thornhope asked.

The young man set the animal down, handed her an envelope, and said: "It's all explained here in this envelope, Ma'am. The dog was bought last July while its mother was still pregnant. It was meant to be a Christmas gift for you." The young man then handed her a book, *How to Care for Your Labrador Retriever*.

In desperation she again asked, "Who sent me this puppy?" As the young man turned to leave, he said, "Your husband, Ma'am. Merry Christmas." She opened up the letter from her husband. He had written it three weeks before he died and left it with the kennel owners to be delivered with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. The letter was full of love and encouragement and admonishments to be strong. He vowed that he was waiting for the day when she would join him. He had sent her this young animal to keep her company until then. She wiped away the tears, put the letter down, and then, remembering the puppy at her feet, she picked up that golden, furry ball and held it to her neck.

Then she looked out the window at the lights that outlined the neighbor's house, and she heard from the radio in the kitchen the strains of *Joy to the World, the Lord has Come*.

Suddenly, Stella felt the most amazing sensation of peace washing over her. Her heart felt a joy and wonder greater than the grief and loneliness. "Little fella," she said to the dog, "it's just you and me. But you know what? There's a box down in the basement I'll bet you'll like. It's got a little Christmas tree in it and some decorations and some lights that are going to impress you. And there's a manger scene down there. Let's go get it."

God has a way of sending an unexpected signal of hope to remind us life is stronger than death. Light is more powerful than darkness. God is more powerful than Satan. Good will overcome evil. Joy is stronger than disappointment. That God is able to act for us in ways we never could have imagined to take away our disgrace and disappointment. That's the message of Christmas.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2015 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1419-1FC