Forerunner - Part One

# Expectant Faith

## (Luke 1:1-25)

I thank you for joining us today as we begin a new message series entitled “Forerunner” looking at the coming of the messenger. The one who would announce the arrival of the Christ, proclaiming the advent of the Messiah, our sovereign Lord who would take his throne, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness forever. And so, it was John the Baptist who was the forerunner, announcing the arrival of the greatest king ever, ushering in a new kingdom and a new era for the world.

The gospel of Mark opens with this statement about the forerunner,

*“It is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"— "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him” (Mark 1:2-3).*

And so, this was John the Baptist, he was the herald, the forerunner, the messenger, preparing the way, and getting the people ready to receive their king. The Son of God was coming, he was breaking into our history, dividing our calendar, and it is a new day for the whole world. This is good news, it’s incredible news, because our King is coming and he’s sent his messenger ahead of him to prepare the way.

God is doing new things and it’s in this season of our lives as we’re preparing to recognize the birth of Christ that many of us are longing for something new. There’s been so much fear, disappointment, turmoil and conflict this year, and many of us are feeling like we’re stuck in this rut, this routine, this new normal of 2020. But God has said in Isaiah chapter 43,

*“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland” (Isaiah 43:19).*

And so, God is doing a new thing, you may not see it, you may not understand it, but he is making a way where there is no way. He’s making streams in the desert, he’s doing new things in your life, in this church, and in this nation. He said, “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way."

Today I want to share with you from Luke chapter 1, and I’m talking about the forerunner, the herald of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. His name is John and he’s the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, but I need to set the stage, giving you a little bit of context so that you understand the setting of the Scripture. John the Baptist comes at a time when Israel hasn’t heard the Word of the Lord for centuries. Israel has no king, no authority, no governing power, and so there in the promised land but they’re not really at home. And what I mean is that they know where they are, they’re familiar with the geography, but it’s like they’re under house arrest; in many ways they are captives in their homeland.

You see, the Roman Empire was a superpower that had conquered territories for miles in every direction. Caesar had set up governors in Israel controlling the direction of the country and suddenly the people of God found themselves losing their language, losing their heritage, losing their uniqueness, because they’re under the control of this foreign sovereign power. And so, the children of Israel are at home, there in the promised land, but it’s not really their country anymore, because the government has changed, the language has changed, and the Romans are using the power of intimidation to keep them under control.

That is the context of this passage of Scripture in Luke chapter 1, Israel is no longer Israel’s, and it’s a confusing time; because they don’t know who’s in office, who’s in charge, who’s doing what. And Luke tells us it’s in this time, in this context, in verse five,

*“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” (Luke 1:5).*

It’s in this time that the people of God are trying to hold onto their culture because they feel like strangers in their own land. Herod is King of Judea, but he doesn’t even believe in God, and yet his token authority has infiltrated every part of their culture. They have been stripped of their authority, there is no longer a succession of Kings, and now this token King, this Herod has put his name on the temple. And so, they’ve lost control of the government, the succession of David’s throne has ended, they’re facing the possibility of losing the priesthood, and they’re just trying to hold on to what little bit of morality, godliness, and culture they have left.

This is what we see in verse five, Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are part of the priesthood, this is their identity, this is their reality, this is their relevance as the people of God, because this is who they are. And so, they’re holding onto this last shred of Israel’s culture, remembering that there is a reason they do what they do, and no matter what they’re going through, no matter what atrocities they may face, they are a dignified people, because they are royalty, the children of Israel, the people of God.

Verse six tells us, both Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth *“were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years” (Luke 1:6-7).*

Now, there’s hope for a child coming from a young woman who’s barren, but now Elizabeth is barren and she is old. And so, Zechariah is holding onto the traditions, he’s holding onto his religion, because if there is no hope for Elizabeth to have a child, there is no hope for the succession of the priesthood. And when your identity, when your hope is threatened, you hold onto your traditions, you hold onto what you’ve always done. You hold onto normal kind of like comfort foods when you’re under stress, eating when you get under pressure, and you go back to your roots.

And so, verse eight says, *“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” (Luke 1:8-9).*

It was time for Zechariah to do what his fathers had done for centuries, and so with determination he shuffles into the temple to maintain some semblance of who he is and corporately of who they are as the people of God. This is the emotion, the feeling behind this text, and so this isn’t just a prelude to the Christmas story, it’s about a people fighting for who they are.

This is all that they had to hold onto, routine and rituals, it’s time to light the incense and pray. Holding onto the last little bit of normal that they have left, Zechariah has gone into the temple to pray, because this is their culture. Their religion is their identity, and so verse ten says,

*“When the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside” (Luke 1:10).*

The multitude has gathered outside praying, they are holding onto their traditions, because normal is all they have left. They go to church because it’s the day you go to church, it’s the place where things happen, but they no longer really expect anything to happen. The people are praying on the outside and Zechariah is praying on the inside, but he is not really expecting anything to happen. He’s praying to God but he wasn’t expecting him to show up. They were going through the routine, but they weren’t expecting anything to happen. Everybody was saying what they were supposed to say, doing what they were supposed to do, but they weren’t really expecting anything to happen.

Suddenly, in verse 11, while Zechariah was praying,

*“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” (Luke 1:11-12).*

Now, this is kind of funny, because when you pray you should expect God to show up, but the very thing they were asking God to do he did, and Zechariah was startled. He was shocked that God actually showed up, and I wonder if some of you have gotten so used to praying and serving just like normal that you don’t really expect things to change? I believe God wants to disrupt some things in here today, he’s going to disrupt some things that you're used to, he’s going to disrupt some things in your life, in this church, and in this nation, because you prayed and he heard you.

Zechariah was praying, and he was used to praying and not getting an answer, but now God showed up, and he was startled and gripped with fear. The angel said,

*"Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John” (Luke 1:13).*

*“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 from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back 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 fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous — to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:14-17).*

God sent an angel and disrupted everything Zechariah normally experienced, but when did nothing become our normal? I know that there are some of you who remember when people were getting out of wheelchairs. And I believe that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever; and he’s about to disrupt something in your life, in your finances, in your marriage, with your children, and with your situation. I believe that some of you are here because you want to see God’s glory and he’s getting ready to disrupt some things.

Zechariah is burning the incense, he’s praying, and his prayers changed the atmosphere in the room. His prayer was a bridge to heaven and Gabriel said,

*“Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son…” (Luke 1:13).*

He said, your prayer has been heard, your prayer is the bridge to that pregnancy you have longed for. And so, it was that… *“Prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16)*. It was that prayer that created the disruption, it was that prayer that started the conversation in heaven, it was that prayer that opened the door for Gabriel to come in.

God said, I heard your prayers, but we need to recognize that Zechariah had been praying for this for years even decades. He was praying for a child when his wife was young and barren, and now he’s still praying and even if she wasn’t barren, now she’s old and you know, old is barren. And so, God said, “I heard your prayers and I’m going to disrupt your normal. In other words, get ready for sleepless nights, feedings and changing diapers, I’m disrupting things, I’m shaking things up, because your wife is going to have a baby.

Now, you can just imagine what is going through Zechariah’s head, because this was happening in church, this wasn’t happening outside the bar at 2 AM in the morning. You know, if you were at the club it would be one thing to have some doubts, but all this was happening in the church. However, Zechariah didn’t believe it and he asked Gabriel,

*“How can I be sure of this?" (Luke 1:18).*

And so, Zechariah wasn’t asking “How will this be” like Mary asked several months later. He wasn’t asking from faith, he was asking from the perspective of disbelief, because he doubted what he heard.

You see, he was going through the forms of godliness, he was serving in the church, but his faith had retired a long time ago. He was doing what he normally did, he was going to the holy place, he was praying, doing what he always did, but he wasn’t really believing it anymore. He was just accustomed to doing it that way, this was his routine, and he was just doing what he normally did.

I wonder if there are any of you who still one normal? You see, I don’t come to church to do normal, I don’t want a normal religion, I come here expecting to experience the power of God. I come to church for the abnormal, because I can find normal at the gas station, I can find normal at the doctor’s office. And so, Zechariah gives Gabriel the normal reasons why this couldn’t be, and they were good reasons, he said,

*“I am an old man and my wife is well along in years" (Luke 1:18).*

But God wants to go beyond anything you might call normal. That’s the kind of God we serve. He’s the kind of God that will wait until it’s impossible for normal to get it done, so that you will know that if it hadn’t been for the Lord it wouldn’t have happened.

And so, Zechariah told Gabriel why he couldn’t have a child and the angel answered like he had been insulted. He said in verse 19,

*“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” (Luke 1:19).*

In other words, he says, I’m not giving you my opinion, I’m just telling you what God said. “Your wife is going to have a baby.”

And so, God is getting ready to break the rules, he’s getting ready to do something in spite of the evidence, and he’s giving them a word that will not come to pass in that place. He’s gonna have to wait on it, but God is about to do something new, something radical, something abnormal, and he said, because you doubted me, because you’re holding onto normal, because your wanting to be practical in the presence of the supernatural.

*“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 proper time” (Luke 1:20).*

And so, God shut his mouth because he’d been speaking against himself all of his life; telling himself what he can do, telling himself what he can be, telling himself what he can’t have, telling himself what he can’t become, and so God said I’m going to shut your mouth in order to bring this to pass in your life at the proper time.

Meanwhile, the Bible says in verse 21,

*“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…” (Luke 1:21-22).*

And so, when he came out, Zechariah came out motioning with his hands and pointing, making gestures to the temple and to heaven and the Bible says,

*“They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak” (Luke 1:22).*

God put Zechariah in a situation where he couldn’t mess it up, he was unable to speak, and he gave him his word as a witness to what he was struggling to believe how and when and who.

All of this happened in the temple, it all happened in the church, this struggle between fear and faith to get Zechariah ready for what God was about to do. God was trying to give him a blessing, but he couldn’t get him to stop talking like everything was normal, acting like everything was normal, believing like everything was normal. And then I love this simple statement in verse 23, it says,

*“When his time of service was completed, he returned home” (Luke 1:23).*

This is so important, because until what’s spoken in your church starts happening in your home, until your faith gets into your ride back home, you’ll never see the power of God do what it’s supposed to do in your life. And so, Zechariah has got some work to do, he’s got to believe what he heard in church, he’s got to believe what he heard in here, but he’s not going to conceive it until he returns home.

It didn’t make sense, it felt like it was too late, it’s the wrong season, it’s the wrong time, but Zechariah went home, he believed, and it was worth it. The Bible says in verse 24,

*“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” (Luke 1:24-25).*

For five months she remained in seclusion, likely fearful that she might lose the baby, that she might lose what was promised, and yet after six months she gets a knock on the door and it was her cousin Mary. The Bible says in verse 41,

*“When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 1:41).*

Not only was the baby leaping, but Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, the dream that she thought may never be anything more than a dream became very active in her life. The presence and power of God was preparing her for something new, because something else was coming. That child in Mary’s womb was coming, but in order for Jesus to be identified and legitimized, John had to come first because he was the forerunner preparing the way for what’s next.

I believe there are some of you who had to be here this morning, you had to get this word this morning, because God is birthing something in you, your wrestling with faith, you’re having a hard time believing, but this word will prepare you for what God is going to do in your life. There may be somebody listening and God is preparing somebody to knock on your door to make that thing inside of you jump, to make a leap, and to bring it to life. And so, would you believe it, would you wait for an answer?

Jesus said, according to your faith, in Matthew chapter 9,

*“According to your faith let it be to you” (Matthew 9:29, NKJV).*

You’re going to have to wait for it, I know it’s new, I know it’s crazy, but if you don’t believe it in here, you can’t conceive it out there. This has got to come first; you’ve got to believe it in here.

So, when we go out, when we leave church today, we’re going to be different, not continuing that cycle of normalcy, not continuing the routines that we can’t break and those fears that we can’t seem to escape, but knowing that God is making all things new. And so now, it’s up to you and I, because what really needs to happen for you to change is what the Bible tells us in Romans chapter 12.

*“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind…” (Romans 12:2).*

And so, that means you do things differently than the world, you trust God, you seek his will in prayer, and you create new habits renewing your mind. In other words, you can’t do things the way you’ve always done things, you’ve got to do things differently so that your mind is redirected in a new and positive direction.

In fact, it’s really as simple as getting dressed in the morning, because the Bible says,

*“Put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Colossians 3:10).*

And so, every day you step into the new self, you put on the new self, because you no longer walking in what’s normal, but you’re walking in the supernatural, your walking in Christ, your living in Christ, and the Holy Spirit does the renewing. And so, in Christ were not just made better, but by God’s power made brand-new, because he’s renewing us, and he’s making all things new. Let’s pray together.

Pastor John Talcott

Christ’s Community Church

303 West Lincoln Avenue

Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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(301) 447-4224

[www.cccaog.org](http://www.cccaog.org)

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