

Sermon for Sunday, December 17, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO

"BELIEVING GOD FOR A BETHLEHEM"

St. Luke 1:5-24

Text: "And Zachariah said to the angel, 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.'" St. Luke 1:18

Today is the third Sunday in Advent. It is the season when we are thinking together about the events that led to the birth of Jesus. Do you think our world today needs Jesus? We live in a time when a large share of the world is under the rule of the communism which is officially atheistic. Another great section of the world follows a religion called Buddhism. Another highly populated area follows Hinduism and another great segment of the world is Moslem. And for that part of the world that makes up the so-called Christian world, we have to admit that it is certainly something less than Christian. So, when we ask, "does the world need Jesus?", we have to answer, "oh, how the world today needs Jesus. How the world today needs a Bethlehem."

Back some 2000 years ago in the days of Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth, the world needed a Saviour, too. They lived in troubled times, in cruel days, in an immoral age. How that world needed a Bethlehem! Yet, the exciting fact is, in those days God did a Bethlehem. How did that happen? How did it occur that at that time and at that place, God sent a Saviour? Well, it seems to me there were two things involved. First, there was God's timing. That's what the Bible says about the birth of Jesus. As St. Paul puts it, "When the time was fully come, God sent forth his Son..." So, to have a Bethlehem, first of all it has to be God's timing. But second, there has to be something on the part of God's people. God always cooperates with man. God always acts with and through man. Therefore, when God wanted to create for himself a people he needed an Abraham. When God wanted to bring his people out of captivity in Egypt he needed a Moses. When God wanted to give his people possession of the Holy Land he needed a Joshua. When God got ready to send a Saviour, he needed a Mary. He needed somebody who would say, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord." So, to have a Bethlehem, it has first to be God's timing, and second, God has to have himself a people.

I want to put the spotlight on that because as we're thinking about the need of our city for a Bethlehem, God must have for himself a people and I want to ask, "Can we be that people of God?"

Let me call our attention to several things about Zachariah and Elizabeth. First, the Bible tells us, "They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." That means they were good people; they were holy people. As best they could, they tried to live by the laws of God. Well, our world needs that today. We need brave men and women who are righteous before God, who are trying as best they can to live as God wants us to live.

But the 2nd thing the Bible tells us about Zachariah and his wife is this: they were conscientious people. They were faithful in doing their duty. For example, the Bible says that when it was Zachariah's turn to be on duty, he was there. And even after his vision when he had been struck dumb for his unbelief, still he did not waver. He stayed at his post, he did his job, he fulfilled his duty. Oh, and how the world today needs people like that. How the church needs people like that. How the church needs faithful, conscientious people who stand fast, who do their duty.

But having said those good things about Zachariah and Elizabeth, let us note a couple of things on the negative side. First, they did not have a very personal relationship to God. When the angel appeared to Zachariah, the Bible says he was "troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him." Well, I suspect a lot of us are like Zachariah. We are good people and we are faithful people, but God is not very real

to us. Is that true in your life? I'm afraid it is often true in my life. Too often our relationship to God is not real and personal so that if he actually appeared to us in the person of an angel we would be frightened.

But the second thing we can say on the negative side about Zachariah is that he didn't really expect God to do anything dramatic and wonderful in his life. He was not believing God for a miracle. For example, the Bible tells us that he and Elizabeth had no children, but it tells us that they had been praying earnestly about this. But when the angel tells him his prayers are answered and they will have a son, Zachariah doesn't believe it. So, they had been praying, but they didn't really believe God for a miracle. "I am an old man" says zachariah, "and my wife is advanced in years."

When you pray, do you expect God to answer you? Do you believe God for a miracle? There is an interesting story recorded in the 12th chapter of Acts. Peter had been thrown in prison by Herod, who had already killed James, the brother of John, and the Christians feared for the life of Peter. So they gathered in the home of a believer and they had a prayer meeting for Peter. The Bible says of them, "So Peter was kept in prison; but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the Church." So, while the church was making this "earnest prayer", God acted! An angel of the Lord appeared and brought Peter out of the prison and Peter went to the home where the Christians were praying. When he knocked and called at the door, a maid named Rhoda recognized his voice and believed. She ran to tell the group and the Bible says, "In her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and told that Peter was standing at the gate." Well! Do you think they believed her? Not for a moment! The Bible says, "They said to her, 'You are mad!'" But when she insisted it really was Peter, they decided he must have been killed and they said, "It is his angel." And then--when Peter kept pounding at the door, they finally opened it and the Bible says of them, "they were amazed." Why were they amazed? Hadn't they been praying for Peter? Hadn't they believed God for a miracle? Didn't they believe God answered prayer?

Well, that's what happened to Zachariah. He prayed but he didn't believe. Do you do that? I know too often I do. I pray, but I'm not really believing God for a miracle. Take our budget campaign this year. Some of our men had been praying for a miracle. Bob Denckhoff, our Budget Chairman, told me, "I'm believing God for \$800,000 for our budget." So there were those in our church who were believing God and God did a miracle among us. The other day we took a check for \$5000 down to the New Life Evangelistic Center for their ministry to the poor. Larry Rice, the director, told me, "we have been praying to God for funds and we have been believing him for a miracle. And he said, "you just put that miracle in my hand." Yes, believing God in prayer for a miracle. We set out to get a thousand blankets for the poor of our city. That's a lot of blankets! But a lot of us have been praying for those blankets to come in. I'm believing God for a miracle. Just last Friday, a man called Dr. Megahan and said he wanted to give a hundred blankets. We are still short, but I've learned my lesson--I'm believing God for those thousand blankets!

Well, there was a lot of things going on when Jesus was born. First, there were faithful men and women like Zachariah and Elizabeth who were living holy lives, who were trying to be good people. If we want a Bethlehem today, you and I will need to do that--we will need to be good people, living righteous lives. But second, people were praying. When Zachariah was in the temple serving the Lord, the Bible says, "And the whole multitude of the people were praying..." It was in that context of faithful people who prayed that God sent John who was to be the forerunner of Jesus, who prepared the way for the Saviour.

Does our world today need a Saviour. Do we need a fresh spiritual awakening in our world, in our nation, right here in our own city? Do we need a Bethlehem today? Oh, you know we do! Well, let us covenant together that we will be a people of God who are trying to live righteous lives, who are trying to be blameless before God. And let us begin to pray, believing God for a miracle, that he will give us a Bethlehem, a spiritual revival here in our congregation, here in our city, that lives may be touched for Jesus.

We simply do not yet know the power of the prayers of the people of God! Do you remember what happened after Jesus ascended to heaven? The Bible tells us in the first chapter of Acts that the disciples, "with one accord devoted themselves to prayer." (verse 14) And it was in the context of God's church at prayer that the Holy Spirit fell upon them in such fantastic power. And then later on, when the church was being persecuted, we read these words, "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness." Well, let's pray for a spiritual revival, a great renewal, a mighty outpouring of God's Spirit. And let's believe God for a Bethlehem! Let's believe that God will hear us and answer our prayers.

When Zachariah prayed, an angel appeared to him and said, "don't be afraid." When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he said to her, "don't be afraid." When the angels appeared to the shepherds who watched their flocks by night, the angels said to them, "don't be afraid." Listen, we don't have to be afraid of God. We don't have to be afraid of what he will ask of us or demand of us or expect of us. We can trust God. I don't know what the future holds and I don't know what God is going to do through this congregation. But I'm praying and I'm expecting a miracle. God is doing a mighty thing here and you and I are privileged to be a part of God's act in our city today. And we don't have to be afraid of God! So, let's pray and let's believe God for a Bethlehem.

In those centuries so long ago, the world needed a saviour. And God used people to bring a Bethlehem to the world. One of those persons was Mary. We have a hymn that says, "Gentle Mary laid her child, lowly in a manger..." Yes, she believed God for a miracle and God gave the world a Bethlehem. How our world today needs Jesus! How our world today needs a rebirth of Jesus in the hearts and lives of men. How our city needs a spiritual awakening, a spiritual renewal. God needs a people-- a righteousness people trying to live for him--a people who are praying and who are believing God for a miracle. Let's be a holy people, trying to live as God wants us to live, and let us pray for a spiritual renewal that begins right here in your life and mine. And as we pray, let us believe God for a miracle, let us believe God for a Bethlehem.