

SERMON
 First Lutheran Church
 Aitkin, Minnesota

Luke 1:5-13, 57-80
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It's all a matter of timing.

Timing – It was some 2,000 years ago, in the days of **King Herod** of Judea. Herod was the despotic, illegitimate ruler of the area around Jerusalem. He was puppet to the Roman occupying army.

It was during the time when **Zechariah** had his turn in the rotation of priests who entered into the Holy of Holies place. Chosen priests went behind the temple curtain to offer prayers to God for God's people. Only the appointed priest was allowed to go into the presence of the footstool of God on earth. All the people were gathered outside the temple while Zechariah prayed for them.

Zechariah was married to **Elizabeth**. She was barren. They were way up in years and she had been unable to have children. It was way **past her time**. To be barren was about the worst thing that could happen to a woman in Israel in that **time**. Elizabeth and Zechariah were both faithful followers of God. They had long prayed for children, but none had come. Too late. **Time** had run out for them.

But then an angel, **Gabriel**, appeared and **changed the timing**. God used an angel to absolutely turn things around for Zechariah and Elizabeth. The angel appeared to Zechariah when he was in the **Holy of Holies** praying for God's people. He wasn't praying for a baby. He was praying for God's people. There came the angel and Zechariah was **terrified!** The angel spoke, "**Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.**" **John "the Baptist"** was coming to prepare for the arrival of Jesus, the Son of God. That's when our text jumps ahead. It skips over the part where the angel says, "**He (John) will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord our God.**" And it skips the part about Zechariah **doubting** the angel's word and then hearing the angel's response. "**But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.**"

It's all about the **timing**. John didn't think it was the **right time** to have a baby. God had a different idea. How did God choose the **time** to move in a miraculous way to bring hope to God's people? God moved

through a **terrified, doubtful priest**. God moved through a **barren, elderly woman** who longed for a child. And God moved through a doubtful, yet hopeful people of God. **Despite all their troubles**, those ancient folks had **just enough faith** to gather one more time for prayer at the house of the Lord. When mute Zechariah, long delayed in the temple, came out, the people knew God had done something.

And elderly Elizabeth got pregnant. And during Elizabeth's pregnancy, her relative **Mary** got pregnant too. Mary journeyed to see the miracle of Elizabeth having a baby and together the women celebrated the amazing, life-changing, life-giving work of God in their lives and world. Mary offered up her praise in what we know as "**The Magnificat**." First she **praised God** for choosing her. **Then she prophesied** what this coming Babe, **Jesus** would do. "**He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors...**"

Can you imagine what this promise might have meant to people of faith who lived in a world **dominated by foreign powers, lorded over by local authorities**, where **every day was a challenge** to put food on the table? People who **felt out of control and helpless**? Mary's promise of the coming of the Son of God might be **good news** for **many people** yet **today**. God's Word of Hope comes into **bad times**.

How did God pick the **time** to deliver the promise of Jesus' coming? God moved through a **doubtful, fearful priest**, a **barren, old woman**, **people stuck** under the thumb of enemies. God moved through a **virgin teenager** and her **older, skeptical husband** – poor as church mice. God moved through a **helpless baby**. God came despite a **hateful king** who killed his own family members to protect his throne. God moved despite the **Roman soldiers** who, as they hunted for Jesus, killed all the little boys in Bethlehem. God moved despite the **refugee status** that Jesus and his poor parents took on as they fled to distant Egypt. What kind of **timing** is that? Why did God choose to come in such a **bad time**?

Doubtful priest, barren old woman, virgin teenager, doubting husband, bloodthirsty king, pursuing soldiers – **what was God thinking?**

That was **terrible timing**. Or was it? Could this also be **God's time right now?**

Doubtful priests? Pastor Melissa, Pastor Bob and myself – ordinary people of God, with our own struggles, doubts and fears. I can't tell you the number of times, when my stomach has been tied up in **knots of fear, inadequacy and doubt**. - when I have gone to **visit the dying**, when I have talked with a **jail inmate**, when I have **counseled with someone about to get married**. The times that I am most terrified are the times when I **forget that God is there** working in and through me. The same is true for my **preaching**. One of my best witnesses to God's life-giving presence in our world is that anything of value can **enter into my heart, flow through my brain** and then somehow **come out of my mouth** in any kind of positive way. If anything helpful comes to you from my preaching, it is "**Thanks be to God**." Lutherans believe in **Living Word**. Jesus speaks to us when we read the scriptures, when we hear the sermon preached, when we share in the sacraments of baptism and communion.

Barren, old women or men? This week's **Aitkin Independent Age** has an article, "**National experts and area seniors agree: church families enhance health and well-being**." Ninety eight year old **Maurice Skar** and his son were interviewed for the article. Maurice "continues to attend Sunday church services regularly. When asked if he thought his faith and his faith community contributed to his longevity, he said simply but firmly, '**Yes**.'" Maurice's son **Duane** told of family discussions regarding where Maurice would go to live when he needed more care. Maurice always responds, "**I'm not leaving my church family**." Older people who keep the faith hold up our world.

Also interviewed for the article, **Ruth Maijala**, 94, said, "**We helped many young families get established. Life was hard but we always had our faith. God has given me reasonably good health for my age... I have never given up on anything**." Do you think either one of these old saints lived a life without trouble or challenge? God hasn't give up on them and they haven't given up on God.

Virgin teenager? Here in our church, there are all kinds of teens who are faithfully engaged in God's mission to love and save this limping, old world. You see them in the **Wednesday night band**, in this morning's **contemporary group**, in our **Senior Choir**, running our **control booth**, at

the **Soup Kitchen**, helping with the **Community Meal**, delivering **Christmas cookies** to the shut-ins, **caring for hurting people**, and **advocating** for those who are bullied at school.

Is this a bad time for God to come into the world in a hopeful way? Do we also have **hate-filled, bloodthirsty leaders**? **Refugees** fleeing to save their families? People who have **grown hopeless** in the **face of poverty, prejudice, sickness and death**? People who think that they are all **alone in the world**?

God picked the **perfect time** to visit Zechariah and Elizabeth. God picked the **perfect time** to visit Joseph and Mary. This is the **perfect time for God to visit us too.**

When John the Baptist was born and his father Zechariah could speak again, he proclaimed, **“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them (bought them back from sin, evil and death). He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David... that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear...”** And a little later, Zechariah promised amazing hope, **“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”**

Christmas isn't just about a little baby, God, being born as a human being, then one day dying and going back to heaven to wait for us there. Christmas is about our God who is **fully aware** of the world we live in, of our **every hope and dream**, of **every struggle and challenge** that we each face. Christmas is about **God becoming one of us – not on some holy mountain**, but in the **everyday moments** of our lives. Christmas is about a God who **comes daily to give us life, wholeness and healing, forgiveness and love, hope and light** in the midst of all the world's darkness. God comes every day to **bring us on the way of peace**. There is **no place** that **God's peace can't visit**. There is **no time** when **God is absent**.

Timing? Our day. Darkness. Shadow of death. God is here. Light. Way of peace. Yours. Today. Christmas. Forever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.