

Old Testament Lesson,

Isaiah 11:1-10

1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. 2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD-- 3 and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears;

4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. 5 Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

6 The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. 7 The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. 8 The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. 9 They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

10 In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.

The New Testament Lesson

Luke 1:5-25

5 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. 6 Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. 11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But 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 give him the name John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 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. 16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 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."

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

19 The angel answered, "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. 20 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 proper time." 21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 22 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. 23 When his time of service was completed, he returned home.

24 After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. 25 "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."

We hear about angels throughout the Bible. But no where do we hear more about angels than around the story of the birth of Jesus, the Son of God, the Savior of the World. In fact, twice in the Christmas story Gabriel is mentioned by name, once in the appearance to Mary, and once in the appearance to Zechariah whose story was read tonight.

With the appearance of angels to Mary, and Joseph, and the shepherds, we sometimes forget the appearance of Gabriel to Zechariah, an old man who served the Lord faithfully, but lived in disappointment because his wife Elizabeth had not given birth. Zechariah served faithfully, but seems to have lacked joy and hope. But, having heard Zachariah's story read, let's look in on Zechariah and see if we can discern how this took place.

Zechariah: (Walking around the altar dusting, candle lighter in hand for burning incense)
Back to work (sighing) Serving in the temple; Teaching the people; Praying for the people and for forgiveness of their sins. (Pause)

Zechariah: O, I know I should be especially happy now. How many members of the tribe of Levi have their name drawn by lot to burn incense before the Lord? But, I do these things in public. What about my family? What about my wife? I love her but we have no children, and now we're too old to have children. (Pause)
But, that's a poor attitude for me to have, especially in the presence of the Lord.

Zechariah: (going to the altar rail and kneeling) O Lord, I thank and praise you for your love and grace, that you call your people to follow you. I praise you Lord for the Messiah who will deliver your people some day. But, Lord, in the midst of this goodness I feel empty. Even though you give good things, I feel disappointed because I don't have children. Help me to receive your blessings and grace with more joy, Lord.

Zechariah: (rising) Well, I'm not sure I feel any better, but I'll try.

Gabriel: (voice from elsewhere) Zechariah. (Pause, again) Zechariah.

Zechariah: What? Who's that?

Gabriel: Zechariah. I am an angel of the Lord, Gabriel. Zechariah, the Lord has heard your prayer. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son. He will be special in the eyes of the Lord. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

Zechariah: Did you say Elizabeth? My elderly wife Elizabeth? Elizabeth will bear a son? But, we're so old.

Gabriel: Zechariah, you doubt the word of the Lord. But God has heard your prayer. And your Son, John, shall do the work of the Lord. But you lack hope and faith. Zechariah, you shall not speak until the child is born. (End scene 1)

Zechariah had lived with disappointment, but Zechariah's life was to change. He was no longer

an old man to be pitied, he would be a father and Elizabeth a mother. And, they were not just mother and father to any child. Their child was one foretold by the Lord, a child preparing God's people for His coming. Their child would be one preparing the way for the Messiah.

So, these elderly people who lived trusting God, but who also lived in disappointment, would now know joy and fulfillment. In fact, because they saw God act in their lives, everything became different. If God can work in Zechariah's life in spite of old Age, well, there is hope in any of life's sorrows or disappointments.

What sorrow do you carry? What failure? What guilt? What disappointment? We live in a world of sin. It is not all our sin but we contribute our own ugliness and failure to the world. It is easy to find disappointment, even for children of God. Sometimes even for God's people it is difficult to find joy and hope because of all the sin and pain and disappointment around us.

But, that first Christmas God sent messengers with Good News. The Good News is about Jesus. But, the Good News is that in our worst situation God is there to help and comfort in times of pain and disappointment. In our worst failure and sin God is there to forgive for our sins because of Jesus and through Jesus. God is there by our side even when we don't know it, like Zechariah.

Think of your most difficult, most painful, most disappointing part of your life. Do you see how God worked in the life of Zechariah? That same Lord has sent Jesus, His Son and our Savior. And Jesus is "Emmanuel", "God with us." Jesus is God with *you*.

Zechariah: (sitting in a rocking chair talking to people) No! No! His name is not Zechariah, his name is John.

Zechariah: An angel, the angel Gabriel, appeared to me and told me God would send a son to Elizabeth and me, even in our old age. My foolish doubt, my disappointment and lack of hope, caused me to question the angel and to question the Lord.

Zechariah: But, God is good and He has sent John and John will prepare God's people and all people for the coming of the Lord.

Zechariah: But listen to this foolish doubting old man. Instead of sorrow I now have joy. Instead of disappointment I now have joy and hope. My joy is here because of my son, John, yes. But, my joy and hope are alive because of the Lord. Life is full of pain and disappointment, but God is there with me in that pain. I want you to know in the midst of life's worst troubles God is with us. In the midst of life's worst troubles there is hope and joy.