2021 Christmas Message (I)

**THE LORD HAS TAKEN AWAY MY DISGRACE**

Luke 1:5-25

Key Verse: 1:25

“’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.’”

The pandemic we have been through during the last two years was an unprecedented experience for all of us. Our livelihood has changed drastically in many ways. Facing many ups and downs has been challenging. Some might feel that there are more downs than ups in our lives. We are sure when we will be out of the woods. Even though Christmas is just around the corner, many people feel lost in the forest. It’s no wonder that peoples’ anxiety level is high. So, to where or whom do we turn?

We will be studying a series of Christmas stories from this week, which highlights God’s faithfulness. Luke, the writer of this gospel, was an evangelist, medical doctor, and historian. His perspective of God’s redemptive work in history is unique and prophetic. What Luke tries to say through these beautiful stories can be summed in one sentence, “God is faithful.” We surely need to have a prophetic vision these days.

In today’s passage, the angel Gabriel foretold Zechariah the birth of his son, John the Baptist, who would be the forerunner of the Messiah. According to the angel’s announcement, the birth of John would not only bring joy and delight to Zechariah and his wife, but many people would also rejoice because of his birth. And Elizabeth confessed by saying “The Lord has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.” This morning let’s think how we can also have the confession she had in our lives.

Look at verses 5-6. “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.” Both Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth had a priestly heritage. Zechariah belonged to the division of Abijah, and Elizabeth was from the family of Aaron. The name **“Zechariah”** means “Yahweh (God) remembers,” and the meaning of the name **“Elizabeth”** is “God’s covenant.” The combined names of this couple underline the fact that **“God remembers His covenant,”** which indicates that God is faithful. What a beautiful match they are, as spouses!

Verse 6 describes that both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. What does it mean that “both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly”? I don’t think it means that they were perfect and made no mistakes. Instead, it could mean that they were quick to repent of their sins as they struggled to obey the Lord’s commands and decrees. In other words, they quickly admitted their faults and corrected them based on God’s words. It sounds simple. But do you think it’s easy to acknowledge one’s faults and fix them all the time? No. But that’s what they did. It shows their spiritual quality of self-discipline.

Life is difficult. Life is a series of problems, one after another, whether we want to it or not. By nature, we don’t want to suffer. But can we avoid suffering? No. We don’t want our children to suffer either. So what should we do? Should we teach our children to avoid suffering? Of course not. We should help them to solve them. How? Self-discipline is the primary set of tools we need to solve life’s problems. Likewise, God our Father made our life difficult so that we can grow mature through self-discipline. If we don’t have the tool of self-discipline, our life can remain in misery. One of the spirit fruits of the Holy Spirit in us is self-discipline. Zechariah and Elizabeth were called righteous in the sight of God because they had the primary spiritual tool of self-discipline.

What life problems did they have? Look at verse 7. “But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.” Infertility was one of their life challenges. I am sure they wanted to have many beautiful children. Yet, they remained childless not just 5-10 years but until both became very old. Infertility is often considered disgraceful even today. Especially in those days, having no children meant having no blessing from God. How embarrassing and frustrating it was for a priestly family to remain childless! In such harsh situations, most people would harden their hearts toward God. Yet, Zechariah and Elizabeth put their trust in God’s goodwill, considering their challenging situation as God’s blessing in disguise. I am sure it required a lot of self-discipline and patience.

Now, something remarkable is going to happen to them. The angel Gabriel visited Zechariah and announced the birth of a son to him while he was on duty to burn incense in the temple. Look at verses 8-13. “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. 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. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.’” The angel’s message to Zechariah has two parts: 1) the affirmation of Zechariah’s life of prayer, 2) the announcement of the birth of a son, John the Baptist.

The angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.” What prayer was the angel talking about? Prayer was Zechariah’s primary duty as a priest. He faithfully prayed for his country people in Israel, including his family members, relatives, co-workers, and friends. I am sure he prayed for a son for a long time. But it’s not clear if he constantly prayed for a child after Elizabeth’s childbearing age had passed, although possible.

So what does Zechariah’s faithful prayer life suggest? Yes, we are supposed to pray continually, like the persistent widow in Luke’s gospel parable (Lk. 18:1-8). Yet, it does not mean that we should insist on what we want from God through prayers. Instead, when we pray, we should put our trust in God’s goodwill, believing that God works for the ultimate good of his children. For that sense, we should always pray, seeking God’s kingdom and his righteousness. Yet, I know it’s not easy because we want immediate relief and satisfaction. It seems that by that time, Zechariah and Elizabeth were no longer captivated by their childless problem. Instead, they got over it and were very grateful for God’s love and blessings despite their childlessness.

Look at verses 14-15. “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 drink wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.” The angel Gabriel wasn’t just offering words of blessing for Zechariah’s son. He predicted that his son would be a joy and delight not only to him but to many people. The angel also indicated that his son John would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth, and he would live a consecrated life, staying away from drinking wine and other fermented drinks. John would be a unique child and a great man of God who would be a source of blessing to many people.

The angel explains more about John’s mission. Look at verses 16 and 17. “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.” What is surprising is that Zechariah’s son, John, would not live as a priest but live as a prophet, like the Prophet Elijah, who challenged the people of Israel to turn away from their sins and come back to God. Living as a priest in the religious system of Israel had some security. Yet, living as a prophet had no guarantee; it involved a lot of suffering, misunderstanding, rejection, and even death. As a forerunner of the Messiah, John would prepare people's hearts through the baptism of repentance, eventually bringing the joy of salvation through Christ Jesus. That’s why the angel said in verse 14, “He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth.” The angel repeated similar words, joy, delight, and rejoice, to highlight his point, the joy of salvation.

Here, we need to pay attention that salvation is not just a single event. But it’s a lifelong journey and process, depending on God’s faithful love for us. Fundamentally speaking, joy and delight in our soul are given when we trust in God’s love and mercy, like little children.

Yet, is it easy to trust anyone, even God, when many challenges surround our lives? No. Trusting someone and even God is not easy. But the good news is that God is trustworthy. He proved his faithfulness by not forgetting but remembering and fulfilling what he had promised to his servant Abraham thousands of years ago. Men are forgetful and changeable. It means that by nature, men are not dependable. But God is not like us. He is trustworthy because he is faithful.

Having said this, I know by experience that trusting God is not easy for most of us. Especially when we face tough situations, our confidence in God’s love is put to the test. Trusting God requires self-discipline, which is also one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:23).

In verses 18-25, we see that even Zechariah, a man of faith, needed the training to achieve a deeper level of trust in God’s faithfulness. Look at verse 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.” Zechariah was a man of solid faith. Yet, after hearing the angel’s announcement that his wife, Elizabeth, who passed child-bearing age, would bear a son, he couldn’t believe it. He fell into doubt because it sounded too good to be true. So he was saying to the angel, *“Are you sure? Do you know how old my wife is?”* It made the angel a little upset.

Look at verses 19-20. “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.” The angel put Zechariah into silence for about ten months, aiming that he would learn complete trust in God’s faithfulness by spending more time alone with God through prayer and meditation of God’s words. It was not easy not being able to speak for ten months. God’s love is tough. But God disciplines those whom he dearly loves.

It reminds us of what Hebrews 12:5b-6 states, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.” Hebrews 12:11 also states, “No, discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” God dearly loves us. But he does not want us to be spoiled. So he disciplines us for our good.

Look at verses 21-25. “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 that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. 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.’” Elizabeth felt disgraced among the people because of her childless situation. But now she confessed, “The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.” Wow! What a wonderful testimony she shared. I hope we can also confess as she did. **“The Lord has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”**

Let me close the sermon. Some things that happen to us now are because of what we did in the past. At the same time, other things that have happened to us are not necessarily because of what we did. Anyway, we suffer because of what happened in the past. Our limitation is that we cannot undo what had happened to us. So what do we do about it?

What we need is God’s grace and favor to take away disgrace from us. The good news is that God, who is faithful, provides us with his grace through his son Jesus Christ according to his promise. God’s grace is invisible, and science cannot understand it, but it’s real. Grace is the mysterious power from heaven that brings healing and makes us whole. It’s completely free.

However, God’s grace is not cheap. We must discipline ourselves to trust in God. If we don’t discipline ourselves, God will still discipline us for our good. God disciples those whom he loves. Therefore, when God disciplines us, we shouldn’t be afraid. Instead, we should accept it as God’s love. Life is difficult and will be challenging to us no matter what. Yet, we can still have an increasing level of peace, joy, and delight in our souls as we learn to trust in the One who is always faithful. At this Christmas season, may we have and renew the joy of God’s salvation in us as we take the challenge of God’s disciplinary love, learn to be silent, and put our absolute trust in him on a deeper level.