

Luke 1:5-17

Jesus is Coming Soon

Main idea: The birth of John the Baptist meant Jesus was coming soon.

You've probably heard the expression, "Christmas in July." And that expression sounds a little funny to us because we know that Christmas isn't in July. We know that Christmas is in December.

And yet, it might come as a surprise to some people that we don't really know when Jesus was born. The Bible doesn't tell us the specific day that Jesus was born, or even the month, and it's not recorded in any early history books.

So, this year, as we look at some of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, my December sermon series is titled, "Christmas in December," with a question mark, as we learn what we can not only about the date of Jesus's birth, but about the miraculous circumstances of God being born among us, as one of us.

Now, I should say from the outset that if I went about this sermon series in a certain way, a way that many people might even find interesting, we'd actually be wasting our time. There are a ton of historical details that we could look at and pull together, and it would all be very fascinating. But if we were to

start talking about genealogies and theoretical dates of events, whether past or future, we'd actually be missing the point of the Bible.¹ And yet, I hope the way that we look at this will encourage us to always focus on what's important and beneficial rather than merely interesting when it comes to our faith.²

You see, the truth is, Jesus really did come down and was born as one of us.³ And while we might not know the precise day that it happened, the Bible tells us all that we need to know about Jesus's birth so that we would believe in Him and have life in His name.⁴

Nevertheless, we can learn some things from the Bible about when Jesus was born, and by studying these passages, I think we can also learn some principles about how to read God's word carefully, so we're going to begin this sermon series by reading about the announcement of John the Baptist.

Luke 1:5-17

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest of Abijah's division named Zechariah. His wife was from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both were righteous in God's sight, living without blame according to all the commands and requirements of the

¹ 1 Timothy 1:3-5

² 1 Corinthians 8:1

³ John 1:14

⁴ John 20:31

Lord. But they had no children because Elizabeth could not conceive, and both of them were well along in years. When his division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, it happened that he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. At the hour of incense the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified and overcome with fear. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. There will be joy and delight for you, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and will never drink wine or beer. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb. He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people." (Luke 1:5-17)

Father, help us to know and believe all that You've said in Your word as we seek to read it carefully, and understand what You've said to us accurately. And transform our hearts to rest in the meaning and beauty of Christmas. In Jesus's name, Amen.

According to the church calendar, we're in the season of Advent, which began last Sunday and is all about being expectant about the birth of Jesus, which is coming soon. A Jesuit priest named Karl Rahner once wrote this about Advent:

It is a strange thing. At the beginning of our preparation for Christmas, the gospel is about the end of the world. And yet, it is not surprising. For what is already contained in a small beginning is most easily recognized in its great ending. What is truly meant by the arrival of the Savior with his great "advent, what has already happened there, is best seen in the completion of this arrival, which we commonly and somewhat mistakenly call his "second advent." In reality, it is the completion of his one advent that is still in progress. This is why our church's Advent is not a mere remembering of something that has gone by, but people's entry in faith and hope and love into a development that started when God himself stepped into the history of his world and made this history his own. -Karl Rahner

You see, Advent is not just about remembering that Jesus came into the world, but is also about remembering that Jesus is coming back. So even though we often only think about Advent around Christmastime, when Jesus was born, we should always live in the spirit of Advent as we wait expectantly for the return of Jesus.⁵

⁵ Philippians 3:20

But before Luke recorded the story about the birth of Jesus, he increased our suspense for the Advent of Jesus when first wrote about the story of the birth of Jesus's cousin, John the Baptist.

So, in our Scripture passage today, we read about John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth. It says that they were well along in years, which is of course just a nice way of saying that they were old. How many of you would describe yourselves as "well along in years"? How many of you would describe yourselves as just plain old? That was Zechariah and Elizabeth.

But another thing it says about them is that they were righteous in God's sight, living blameless according to all the commands and requirements of the Lord. I'm not sure many of us would describe ourselves that way. Now, it doesn't say that they were perfect, because only God is perfect,⁶ but it does say that they were blameless, meaning that they didn't excuse themselves from obeying God, and no one could accuse them of being hypocrites in their faith and lifestyle. They were humble before God and sought to live according to all that He commanded. And when they failed, they repented and turned from their sin. They put their hope in God, and trusted in Him alone. They were blameless.

And what's even more remarkable about them is that they did all this according to the Old Testament Law. As Christians, we serve God under the New Covenant. We trust in Jesus's death

⁶ Matthew 5:48, Romans 3:23

and resurrection, and God forgives us by grace through faith in Him, and therefore we serve God out of the joy of our salvation.⁷ But as Jews, Zechariah and Elizabeth served God under the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant promised blessings for obedience, and curses for disobedience.⁸ So as they served God, they expected that they would be blessed for doing so.

And yet, they were childless. One of the greatest blessings according to the Old Testament is to have many children,⁹ but they were childless. Many people in their circumstances may have become bitter toward God, and turn away from God because they felt like God had not lived up to His end of the bargain. And yet they remained faithful to God.

Maybe you've had circumstances in which you feel let down by God. Zechariah and Elizabeth's example encourages us to be faithful to God not because of what we can get out of it, but simply because God is worthy of all our praise.¹⁰

And this is how they lived for many years.

And then, when they least expected it, an angel appeared to Zechariah and said this, starting in verse 13.

Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will

⁷ Ephesians 2:8-10

⁸ Deuteronomy 11:26-28

⁹ Psalm 127:3

¹⁰ Psalm 145:3

name him John. There will be joy and delight for you, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and will never drink wine or beer. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb. He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people. (Luke 1:13-17)

If you're familiar with the prophecies and events that led up to the birth of Jesus, you know that this was a pretty big deal. The Old Testament Scriptures, written hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, foretold that a prophet like Elijah would come before the Messiah. In fact, the Old Testament ends with that prophecy.¹¹ Malachi 4:5-6.

Look, I am going to send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse. (Malachi 4:5-6)

So this person who would be like Elijah was going to have a huge role in preparing the people of Israel. He would preach in such a way as to reconcile the children to their fathers, and fathers to their children, as each repented before God and was

¹¹ Also Isaiah 40:3, Malachi 3:1

reconciled to God. And Malachi prophesied that this would be the precursor to the day of the Lord, which is what the Hebrew Scriptures often called the coming of the Messiah.¹² This was a big deal!

And Luke 1 says that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of this prophecy!

When Zechariah prayed that he and his wife would have a child, he had no ambitions that his child would be the one who would usher in the coming Messiah. And yet, when God answers prayer, He does it in such a way that goes far beyond what we can ask or imagine.¹³

And it's all because of Jesus.

When we pray, God hears our prayers not because we're righteous enough to talk to God, but because Jesus forgives our sins and makes us righteous. He gives us His righteousness.¹⁴ And when we pray for things that we think we want or need, God fulfills these things according to Jesus. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians:

For every one of God's promises is "Yes" in him. Therefore, through him we also say "Amen" to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 1:20)

¹² Isaiah 13:6, Joel 2:31, Zephaniah 1:7, Obadiah 1:15

¹³ 1 Corinthians 2:9

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:21

So when you pray, don't pray selfishly, so that you would spend what you get on yourself,¹⁵ but pray according to the will of God, who is Jesus.¹⁶ Because it's in Jesus who we find our hope,¹⁷ our purpose, our life, and just as the prophecy about John the Baptist meant that the Messiah was coming soon, we also know that Jesus is coming soon.¹⁸

Now, you might have followed everything we've said so far and thought, "So how does this help us to determine when Jesus was born? What does this have to do with the actual birthdate of Jesus?"

Well, if you continue reading Luke 1, you find that in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Mary is told by an angel that she herself would give birth to the coming Messiah.¹⁹ So if we can determine when John the Baptist was born, we might also be able to determine when Jesus was born.

The first clue is in verse 5. It says this took place "in the days of King Herod of Judea." There were actually 7 Herods mentioned in the Bible, three of which had a turn at being king of Judea,²⁰ and this was almost certainly the one referred to as Herod the Great, who ruled as king of Judea from 37 BC until his death in 4 BC. So we read in the first part of verse 5:

¹⁵ James 4:3

¹⁶ John 15:7

¹⁷ Titus 2:13

¹⁸ Revelation 1:7

¹⁹ Luke 1:26-31

²⁰ <https://www.swcs.com.au/herods.htm>

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest of Abijah's division named Zechariah. (Luke 1:5a)

Now skip to verse 8.

When his division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, it happened that he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. (Luke 1:8-9)

It's the first few words of verse 8 that give us a huge clue as to when Zechariah heard the news that his wife would have a baby. It says, "While his division was on duty." While that might not seem like a lot of information to us, it actually could give us a fairly accurate timeframe for when these things took place.

We learned from verse 5 that Zechariah was a priest of a particular division: the division of Abijah. And the way that the Levite priests took turns was by division.²¹ Each division took a week in the first half of the year, and a week in the second half of the year. And we can actually even look this up. According to one source,²² Abijah's division took their first turn in 6 BC between May 17 and 24, and their second turn between October 2 and 9. It says in verse 10 that there was a whole assembly of people praying outside, which would have been unlikely in October because of the weather in the region at that

²¹ 1 Chronicles 24:1–18

²² <https://biblearchaeology.org/images/articles/Daniel9/DANIEL9-PriestlyDivisionsFullChart-181217.xls>

time of the year. Therefore, we know with a high degree of certainty that Zechariah took this turn at the end of May. And if that's the case, John the Baptist would have been conceived in the beginning or middle of June, born in the middle of March, and Jesus would have been born at the end of June or the beginning of July.

So maybe we should celebrate Christmas in July.

But with all this said, why do we celebrate Christmas on December 25?

One reason is simply because none of this is as clear cut as we've looked at it so far. It assumes all sorts of things. It assumes that Zechariah and Elizabeth conceived basically as soon as he returned home from his temple service, and that both Elizabeth and Mary carried their babies to full term, and that the Abijah division's service dates are even accurate at all. In fact, as I was researching all these things, it was nearly impossible for me to find even just two sources to agree on almost any of these things!

So dating the birth of Jesus according to when Zechariah served may be a dead end in and of itself, but it does tell us at least this much: Jesus was almost certainly born before within a year of Herod the Great's death in 4 BC, meaning that Jesus wasn't born in 1 AD as our calendars today would suggest. When a monk counted back 525 years to when he calculated

the birth of Jesus and called it 1 AD, which stands for Anno Domini, which is Latin for “the year of our Lord,” he didn’t at all explain how he arrived at that determination, he just started using it.²³

And yet, none of that is really all that important, is it? We celebrate Christmas on December 25, and we date our calendars according to a monk’s best guess at the time of when Jesus was born simply because Jesus’s birth is the most significant birth in all of history, and we ought to celebrate it. The exact date it happened isn’t the important thing. What’s important to know is that it happened. Jesus came, and He’s coming again.

Are you living your life based on that truth? The calendar being oriented around the birth of Jesus is only a small symbol of how our whole lives ought to be oriented around Jesus. Because Jesus doesn’t just want to save you, He wants to transform you so that you’re righteous and blameless in the way that you live.²⁴

And that begins to happen when you trust in Jesus.

²³ <https://time.com/4462775/bc-ad-dating-history/>

²⁴ 2 Corinthians 3:18