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Luke's Good News

Chapter 1, verses 57-80

So what is God doing?

The time was completed for Elizabeth to have a child, and she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had greatly increased his mercy toward her, and they celebrated with her.

On the eighth day they came together for the child's circumcision. They were calling him Zechariah (which means "God remembers") after his father's name. His mother responded by saying, "No, he will be called John (God is gracious)."

This was more significant than a mere label. A name was a way of saying "this is what this person will stand for." The name Zechariah suggests that this person is holding on to the hope that the Lord will someday fulfill his promises. But the name John suggests that God is already making his grace known. John was destined to be the prophet who announced not that the Savior will come someday, but that God's grace has now come in Person. The former prophets only hoped to see the Savior, but John would know him face-to-face.

This was lost on the neighbors and family. They were thinking only of tradition. They protested, "No one in your family is called John." A woman had just given birth at an impossibly old age, but her friends failed to recognize this as the surprising gift of the gracious God. Not willing to take Elizabeth's word for it, they gestured to the child's father. What would he call the boy?

Asking for a writing tablet, he wrote, "His name is John," and surprised everyone.

Suddenly Zechariah's mouth was open and his tongue was praising God. This got the full attention of everyone living around them, and all Judea was talking about it. Everyone who heard about it thought deeply, "What is this child all about? Clearly, God is at work in his life."

Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he prophesied, "The Lord, the God of Israel, is praised because he showed up and paid the price to free his people. He showed us the power of salvation in the family of his servant David--just as he said through the mouths of his good prophets in the old days. He showed us salvation from our enemies, from the hand of those who hate us; salvation that gives us mercy along with our forefathers; salvation that remembers his holy covenant with them, the promise he gave to our father Abraham; salvation that rescues us from the hand of our enemies to be with him without fear, in devotion and justice always.

"You, my child, will be called prophet of the Highest. You will precede the Lord to make the way ready for him: You will give his people the knowledge of salvation, the release

from their sins through the affectionate mercy of our Father. In that mercy he will come, like a sunrise from heaven, to shine on those in the dark, those who live in the shadow of death. He will shine to guide our feet in the peaceful way."

The child began to grow. He grew strong in spirit. He lived in the wilderness until the day he was introduced to Israel.

What a contrast! The neighbors are happy merely to see Elizabeth have a baby. The community is noticing that God is doing something unusual. But in his months of silence, Zechariah noticed what God had been saying all along. God works in power to deliver his people out of fear and shame, out of sin and hate. God works in grace to deliver his people into justice and honor, into love and peace. And to do that, he works in the lives of an aging couple, and in the birth of their child. Precisely because the purpose is so all-important, the bigness of the purpose will not overlook the smallness and need of the people involved. God cares about the ideals for the world, so he cares about despised nations, long-suffering people, and intimate moments. He cares about more than we imagine.