

Time of Grace Ministry
Heroes of Christmas: Zechariah
Luke 1:57-66
November 5, 2017

Pastor Jon Enter

Welcome to Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Jon Enter. Who is a hero to you in your life? That's a rather difficult question to answer because depending on what area of life you're looking in at the moment, you can have different heroes. If you're in the age of parenting your children or even if you're past that age, you maybe had a hero; someone that you looked up to in your church or in your community and said, "I want kids like that." For me? My parents are my heroes when it comes to parenting; loving and firm, yet fair. That's how they were, how they still are. They're a big blessing to me; they're heroes.

We have sports heroes. For me, it was Kirby Puckett. Oh, I loved how amazing he was as an outfielder for the Minnesota Twins, won us all kinds of championships. When I was growing up, I looked up to him. He was great on the field and off the field. People have sports heroes. And of course, there's also those everyday heroes; great, brave men and women who serve with our police and firefighters and EMT, teachers that get into the classroom and help the kids, our servicemen and women stateside, overseas. They pour so much love and so much effort into their everyday lives.

I live in Florida and very recently, we had some hurricanes come and hit us pretty hard. And when we huddled in our homes and hid there or evacuated and fled, those heroes - everyday heroes - were out there working and on the streets.

The amazing thing about heroes is that they take something that seems impossible and they make it possible. Pastor Mark Jeske is going to start a new message series called, "Heroes of Christmas." And the cool thing you're going to see is that each one of these different people, they're ordinary people; just like you, just like me. But God does the extraordinary through them. Today, we're going to look at Zechariah; an ordinary, everyday guy. But God put him in a timeout for a purpose. What does that mean? Pastor Jeske is about to tell you.

Pastor Mark Jeske

Well, I want to talk to you about the frustration of what it must be like not to be able to communicate. When Helen Keller was holding a mug one day, she got so frustrated that she threw the mug and almost conked Anne with it, just because her frustration at having no communication overwhelmed her. But I want to talk to you about somebody else who had lost his ability to communicate; a person who really is a hero of mine. I call him an Advent hero because he's so approachable. The type of hero I don't need is somebody who is so far above me, so much more powerful, or smart, or rich, that is so far above me, I can't have anything in common. The reason why I really resonate with Zach is that he could be a dope, like me. And it

makes me have confidence that God can use a sometimes confused and mislead fool like me and get something out of him.

And I'd like you to take your Bible with me today and I'd like you to go to Luke 1 with me and we have to kind of hop and skip through it because it's unfortunately, just a little too long to read completely. But turn to Luke 1 and come and meet my friend, Zach. Zach is a Levite and not just an ordinary, garden variety Levite who was allowed to work around the temple grounds and perform various worship-related tasks. He was part of the family of Aaron, one of the lineal descendants to Aaron, Moses' brother, and thus qualified for being a priest. And he was one of 24 teams of priests. They would work their farms or I don't know if he had crops or if he had animals or probably both – in this little village, he lived in a little village in the hill country of Judah – so probably a half a day's walk from Jerusalem, I would guess. And half a month every year would be his time of duty. So he would say goodbye to his wife and he would head into town, live with the other priests and Levites in the temple precincts, and it was his job to perform the sacrifices and every day to offer up prayers and that's where we meet him in Luke 1. He's praying on behalf of the people. And he's standing where no other Israelite dared to stand – right in front of the golden table of incense. And God had built a drama there to teach people a few things and it's a beautiful thing, really. In fact, you might want to do it in your home. He wanted people to realize that when the sacrifices had been taken care outside on that great, big, gigantic, barbeque pit where the smoke and the hot fires never went out – there was always a smell of something burning for all the sacrificing that was done outside. When those prices, those sacrifices, had been made and the price for their sin had been paid, the people were free and clear; God's beloved children, who could be close enough to God. And on behalf of the entire nation, Zechariah and the other priests could step into the building; as priests, they were the mediators. They were sort of temporary stand-ins for Jesus himself, who is now our priest. But back then, he would ceremonially – he would stand for the people and represent the people and step up to the golden table and there he would light the incense.

And God did that on purpose for at least two reasons. One reason is as you would see the smoke rising, it would be a way to imagine that your prayers were going up to heaven. They weren't clunking on the ground unheard like email messages that never got delivered or mail that goes round and round the post office, goes to Chicago and D.C. and Anchorage before coming back to your house saying, “undeliverable.” The smoke of the incense rose and God wanted the people to know my forgiven children's messages come straight to me.

And second, it smelled real good in that place and God wanted people to know that though your sins make you stank before me, through the forgiveness you have, you smell good and you don't have to be afraid to talk to me because your voice is sweet in my ears and I love hearing from you. And it gives me pleasure to release blessings upon you for no other reason than that you asked me.

So Zach is doing his thing. He's an older guy, his wife is older, too. They had no children; it was the pain of their life. It's a subject that if you live long enough, you'll run into all over the place. I've got tons of friends as couples who have no children. It's a subject you can never bring up because it's so painful; you can't ask. And in my experience, they don't volunteer that

information too readily because it's painful. This poor woman had put on herself – Elizabeth had put on herself – the additional frustration of perhaps concluding it was a form of judgment; that God, in some way, was angry with her or had placed some kind of burden of judgment on her. And it was like a heavy, heavy weight, some sadness; they had to carry with them wherever they went. And things really have not changed too much. Infertility still is a heavy burden that some couples have to bear and all you can do is just be there to love them; you can't fix it or change it. And this woman, Elizabeth, is going to have a baby but you know, she said, "The Lord has done this for me. He's taken away my disgrace." And you might say, "Man, Liz, don't be so hard on yourself. It's not like you're disgraced. Man, infertility is everywhere. It might not even be your fault. You know, did it ever dawn on you it might be Zach's plumbing that's defective? You know, 50 percent of the time in infertility, it's the male that has some kind of biological breakdown. Don't be picking on the woman all the time but for her, you know, that was her life's dream to hold her baby in her arms and it didn't happen.

So anyway, I'm ahead of myself here. Zach is in front of the altar, he's praying away and suddenly, the angel Gabriel appears; scares him half to death. And as always, when an angel appears, they always have to say something first: "Don't be afraid." In fact, these are the first words we hear in the New Testament era: "Don't be afraid." It's really a sweet little gospel message. God has that message for you, as well. "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard." I wonder if right at that moment he had been saying, "Dear Lord, I wish we had a kid," because suddenly, bam, "Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son and you're to give him the name Yochanan," the Lord is gracious, that means in Hebrew. "He will be a joy and delight to you. He will be great in the sight of the Lord." Verse 16: "Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God." He's going to be like Samuel; he's going to bring about a spiritual reformation. One guy – just like Samuel – what could one little runty guy do with no great wealth, no power, no military command? He wasn't General Samuel; he just was a quiet talker and went on a little preaching circuit in the central part of Israel and yet, he basically helped to preserve a core of believers that were still in existence at this time.

Verse 17 says his job will be, "To make ready a people prepared for the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah." Holy smokes! The prophet Malachi had said that a second Elijah was going to come and now Gabriel says to Zach, "It's going to be your boy, the second Elijah's, coming through you and your wife."

And now comes this Advent saint's low point. Just as Sarah laughed, a mocking laugh, when told she would have a baby – it wasn't a "oh, how wonderful!" laugh, it was a "yeah, right," it was a bitter laugh, an ironic laugh. Like when somebody says, "You are going to receive a check for \$10,000 tomorrow, you go, "Yeah, right." And you pretend that you're in agreement with it but it's only sarcastic, "Yeah, right." That was what was going on here and Zechariah asked of the angel, "How can I be sure of this for I'm an old man, out of ammo, and my wife is well along in years and she's out of eggs?"

How can I be sure of this? The angel answered: "I am Gabriel," you twit. I put the part about the twit in there; that wasn't actually in the biblical text but that's what he meant and there's an exclamation point after – "I am Gabriel! How can I be sure? You want a sign? What am I,

chopped liver? Like, hello? I came straight from the throne of God right here and I'm not enough for you? You want more?" Good grief. Since your mouth is operating disconnected from your brain, you need to spend some time in prayer.

When my kids were naughty, when they were little, I used to make them sit in the prayer chair outside my office. And you know, when they're little, they're jittery; kids can't sit too long. And they would think they had enough and I would invite them in for an interview and I would gauge how their spiritual condition was and if they were still defiant or angry, I would suggest they go and pray some more longer. They said, "I did pray!" And I said, "You haven't prayed enough, my son. Go and pray some more." And then when their spirit and voice had softened, then I knew they were ready.

Well, Zechariah is going to put on the timeout chair and he's going to have his Helen Keller time. Total silence; mute and deaf, as well. He will become a deaf mute. Apparently could still see and his fingers still had their mobility but his ability to hear and communicate were taken away. Real interesting timeout for Zach because he needed time to think. God was choosing a really big job for him and he had just flunked his first test; he just flunked the quiz. Why did he say – why would he blabber that out? First of all, he wanted control of the process, same as Abraham. Abraham was getting so impatient for a baby that he actually got his wife's handmaiden, Hagar, pregnant because, "I've got to make something happen here."

Second, it was direct disobedience to God. Third, he was giving Gabriel an insult – "I don't know who you are and I don't know where you're coming from with this message" – he's just insulted one of the archangels of heaven itself. And basically, he's telling God what God can't do: "You can't do that. It's impossible for you because it's impossible for me. Since I can't do it, you can't either, God," and those were very bad spiritual sicknesses and he needed a timeout, a really long timeout.

Now for all he knew – he didn't know when the end time was – for all he knew, he was going to be incommunicado for the rest of his life. So he goes outside and he can't talk to the worshippers out there waiting for him to come out after the prayers are over. And then to his great astonishment, Elizabeth becomes pregnant and says my disgrace has been taken away.

Now let's jump ahead to the happy day of the birth – that's in verse 57 – and they heard that the "Lord had shown her great mercy," so clearly, she and Zach, in their own way, were communicating the testimony that this was a miracle baby of God's grace. And on the circumcision day, the eighth day – this is the way, this is what they had sort of instead of baptism; this is how the little boys would be brought into the covenant – that's when the children are named and they're going to call him Zach, Jr., but his mother spoke up and said, "No, his name is to be called John," that's the name the angel had given, so apparently, Zach, Sr., had written that out for her; he couldn't talk so he must have written it for her.

And they said, "There's nobody among your relatives who has that name." The Hebrews loved to recycle their names; we like to do that, too. So they, "Made signs to his father," because he's deaf, deaf as a board, "to find out what he would like to name the child. And he asked for a

writing tablet and to everyone's astonishment, he wrote, 'His name is John.' Immediately, his mouth was opened, his tongue was loosed," and he unloaded a string of curses out of frustration for having been silent so long. I made that up, too. Don't do this at home; you're not supposed to make up stuff and put it in God's word. That's what you would expect would have happened. He finally unloaded intense frustration of being corked up like a bottle with a cork jammed in his mouth but instead, all that came out was praises. His timeout was perfect and he used his newly regained communication ability to explode in praises to a God who could do everything well and was going to do everything just as he said. His boy was going to run ahead of the Savior of the world. Imagine that! And it was still way in the future; that was 30 years away from this point. But see, Zach was now believing promises of things he couldn't see and that's a big deal to God because nobody gets to see everything. The entire rescue of the human race is all about believing a word of God that you cannot see. That is the only way that lost sinners are reconnected with their Savior, believing in the promises.

That's why Jesus was so upset with his disciples on Easter Day. They got one scolding after another: "How slow you are to believe!" He was so distressed at their lack of faith and their unbelief because he was going to expect them to be proclaimers of the very message they themselves were not believing on Easter, for crying out loud. Here, Zach goes from the dog house to the penthouse, you might say, in our estimation. And he bursts into speech praising God. Everybody in the hill country of Judea was talking about these things, so he was proud to be an evangelist for what God was up to. Then filled with the Holy Spirit, he burst into a beautiful poem, a little bit reminiscent of Hannah's excited poem when she got her baby, Sam. And I just want to concentrate on just one sweet line with you where Zechariah shows he now grasps exactly what God is up to: "And you, my child," verse 76, "you will be a prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before the Lord himself to prepare the way for him. To give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will visit us, or come down to us, from heaven, shining on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death and guiding our feet to the path of peace."

What a beautiful poem and what a happy little family. Did they live long enough to see their boy do his ministry? Don't know. But they did their job and so, to me, Zach is an Advent hero and I'll tell you why – I hope he is for you, too – but he sure is one for me.

Here's reason number one why I think he's a great Advent hero – because he's not Mr. Perfect. He had his time of being a dope and that gives me comfort to know that God can use a dope like me, making many mistakes in life and getting things backward, misunderstanding things, misunderstanding people, jumping to wrong conclusions, reading situations wrong, talking when I should shut up, and shutting up when I should be talking. I've got a thousand of them littered behind me and so do you. But Zechariah shows that God can make use of broken people like you and me, too. He can use fools like you and me and the broken ones to do great things and we get second chances. And what we do after we've realized our mistakes is more important than going into a spiral of self-pity or depression. He got over it. His quiet time, his timeout, helped him spiritually.

That's the second thing I'd encourage you to learn: Your timeouts from God, when he takes things from you, is not a sign of anger, displeasure, or punishment or judgment on you. Sometimes he helps you be more effective for him by giving you stuff like money or brilliant talents but sometimes, he takes things away like abilities, like mobility or hearing or vision or speech. And the things he takes away from you are not to beat you down but in some way, to refine you, to make you even more useful and to give you a platform in your life that though it's hard on you, in some way, advances his kingdom's agenda, which sometimes you can see and sometimes you cannot see. But he sees it and that's what matters.

And Zechariah's timeout of living for nine months in darkness and silence only helped him be even more awesome as a communicator for the gospel. And thankfully, God decided to have the spirit write down that incredible little poetic burst that came out of his month to celebrate an Advent hero who was now proud to be a messenger of the messenger; the messenger of his son, John – John the Baptist – who himself had to learn that God would decide what was best for him and gave glory to God even in his prison after a ministry of only basically a year and a half he ends up in a dungeon. And then what he thought would be his walk maybe to freedom turns out to be the walk to his execution spot where he was beheaded. Even then, he gave glory to God by his death and his story is told and retold over and over. He's a hero, as well, but his dad – even 30 years before those events happened – his dad is an Advent hero. To show that he grasped what God was up to, to send the Son of Righteousness with healing and forgiveness in his rays.

This Christmastime, I invite you to try to remember this man while you try to pick your way through the insanity and craziness of the pressure-packed, consumer Christmas that's already coming upon you and that without some involvement and conscious effort on your part, is going to destroy any type of spiritual preparation you might try to make. Try to hold the craziness at bay and just remember that God cared enough about you and me to come in person to relive our lives for us, to suffer our judgment for us, to take our death upon him, to go to hell, as it were, for us on the cross. To experience all of the wrath of God so that you and I, as Zechariah said, might experience God's beautiful favor.

That's what Advent and Christmas really are all about. And if you've got that safe and straight in your head, we're going to have a great month. Zach, you're one of my heroes. Can't wait to meet you! Amen.

Pastor Jon Enter

Do you feel like you're stuck? Just absolutely stuck in a timeout right now from God? Suffering consequences of past wrongs that you have done and it's just not getting better, you're not getting out? When you're stuck in a timeout, it is zero fun to be there; just ask any of my kids. When they do something wrong, say one of my daughters hits one of her sisters, or they backtalk to mommy and daddy and we put them in, let's say, a five minute timeout - 32 seconds later, "Are we done yet? Can we be out of our timeout?" It's no fun to be stuck waiting! When my kids get in trouble, they're very quick to apologize but I know they just haven't learned their lesson. They're going to repeat it and repeat it again.

God places us in timeouts at times and that lasts longer than we really want it to and when that's happening, if you're feeling stuck right now, don't get angry, don't get upset. Dig deeper. Dig deeper to understand why God still has you in that moment because God wants two things from you. He wants you to repent; to repent of the sins and the wrongs that you've done, to open your heart before him, and to be filled with his grace, filled with his mercy, but God doesn't want you to be just quick to repent. God doesn't want you to repeat it. So dig deeper. Understanding God's love for you, God's mercy is always there for you and his plan is to grow you in faith with him.

Let us pray. Christ Jesus, we praise you. We thank you for your grace, your favor that is constant; that flows into our hearts and into our lives. We even thank you for timeouts. We thank you for the way that you get us to slow down and to realize that the lives that we lead are not lives that are always pleasing to you; that we prioritize ourself. We prioritize our wants and our desires. We ignore the laws that you have given to us and we stand broken before you. And Lord, as we children run away from our parents when we do wrong, Lord God, we also run away from you. But God, you go after us. We thank you for that. You go after us to draw us back to you. You put us in a timeout, a time of reflection, so that we can open our hearts to you - not in fear of you, but in joy in you; confident that you forgive; that you're a loving God and a merciful God.

Lord God, no matter what we've done wrong, no matter of all of the failures that are in our lives, in you there is grace. Help us to come to you confident and to repent and then confident to not repeat; to not to do again, fall again, into the failures of our past and to live in present grace knowing that you love us and knowing that your favor's always upon us. Thank you. Thank you, Jesus, for treating us better than we deserve. Help us to live for you. In your name we pray, Amen.

For Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Jon Enter. It all starts now.



TIME OF GRACE®

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Heroes of Christmas: Zechariah

Luke 1:57-66: ⁵⁷“When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. ⁵⁹On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰but his mother spoke up and said, ‘No! He is to be called John.’ ⁶¹They said to her, ‘There is no one among your relatives who has that name.’ ⁶²Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, ‘His name is John.’ ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, ‘What then is this child going to be?’ For the Lord’s hand was with him.”

Points to Ponder

1. Why do you think that several times in the Bible God used older couples to have babies of significance to his salvation plan?
2. Why did God give Zechariah a “spiritual time-out” by making him unable to hear or speak?
3. **Read Luke 1:63.** Why is it significant that the baby was named John, which was not a traditional name in Zechariah’s family?

4. **Read Luke 1:64.** When Zechariah was able to communicate again, what were the first things out of his mouth? What did he finally realize during his time-out?

5. Has God ever given you a time-out? How did that time refine you and make you more useful to his plan for you?

Zechariah didn't immediately believe that he and Elizabeth would have a child meant to be the forerunner of Christ. But after his time of being deaf and mute, he praised God, realizing that the entire rescue of the human race is about believing the word of a God we can't see. Lost sinners are reconnected with their Savior by believing in God's promises. God works through broken people, and when we have struggles, they refine us and make us more useful to him.

What else does God say?

Isaiah 40:1: A voice of one [is] calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

1 Peter 1:7: These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.