

Impossible Things Can Happen **Andi Oney**

Hello, my name is Andi Oney, of Hope and Purpose Ministries. And I'm delighted to be with you during this advent season as we journey toward the celebration of Emmanuel, God with us. In this session, I will share with you a bit about some of the events that precede the birth of Jesus. It's a story about Zachariah and Elizabeth and their child, John the Baptist. It's a story of a family steeped in prayer coupled with the desire to live a good and righteous life, lives that make faith in the practice of faith priority. And like our own families with its ups and downs, there's an element both of long suffering and hope but ultimately, it comes a season of rejoicing, a season of favor and blessing. If this were a biblical reality television program it could be titled, "Impossible Things Do Happen." Let's look at what the word of God from Luke's Gospel tells us to discover some truths about this chosen family beginning with Zachariah.

Zachariah is a priest from the lineage of Aaron, who is the great high priest. And Aaron as we know, was the brother of Moses. Zachariah's very name gives us a hint to what's to come. His name means the Lord remembers. It was not uncommon for a priest to marry someone from the same lineage because he would have been expected to marry someone of high reputation. And as we will see, he does just that when he marries Elizabeth. Elizabeth's name further signifies God's plan her name means the oath of God. We know that an oath is a solemn promise and it's like evoking a witness regarding the future action or behaviors. But these names come together, and you have, God remembers a solemn promise. And this is exactly what will happen in their lives.

Both Zachariah and Elizabeth are righteous in the eyes of God, observing all the commandments, scripture says they were blameless. It sounds good so far, but they were not unlike many of us today in our own families. There was a situation, and, in this case, the situation was that they had no child. Elizabeth is barren and she and Zachariah are advanced in years. And this would have carried a tremendous weight on them because bareness was thought to be an extension of the idea that they were in this state as a result of sin. Being without children also had other implications for Zachariah and Elizabeth. A cause for concern because children cared for their parents in their old age. Children were dependent upon for financial security. But I believe the overriding practical concern was the stigma that was placed on them. Children were considered a blessing and childlessness was seen as a curse.

In the natural order of things, this seems so unfair. Especially because we read that Zachariah and Elizabeth were both faithful people, yet they had been suffering what was thought a disgrace. Zachariah and Elizabeth were considered upper-class because they were descendants of Aaron. Zachariah belongs to the officiating priesthood and there was a certain status that accompanied the priesthood in that time. According to where they lived which was in an obscure village, that was in a hilly region south of Jerusalem, we learned something deeper about them. They're not living in the elite section of the city or in Jericho, which was the luxurious city of palms. What we learn is that they were not caught up in the prestige that came from being from the priestly line of Aaron. They were different. They were set apart, caring more about what God thought than about what society thought. They were striving to live pleasing to God, and they submitted to God, they obeyed God, and they didn't do it for show. They did it for God.

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Now that we know a little bit about the family dynamic, we can move forward to how the Lord sees fit to take away their disgrace, to restore hope and to bless them abundantly. We could title this section as, "Zachariah's Unforgettable Day." Priests of this time were broken into groups that served in the temple. And this is the refurbished temple with his expanded courts built by King Herod. Each group of priests served in the temple for a time, a week at a time on a rotating basis. And there would administer before the golden altar offering incense in the sanctuary. Priests were chosen by lot for this privilege to burn incense in the morning and at the evening offering.

This is an event to remember for Zachariah because it would have only happened once in the lifetime of a priest. So, there's already this great anticipation of Zachariah for this occasion. So at three o'clock when he enters the holy place where the altar is located while the assembly, the scripture tells us, prayed outside in the temple courts the angel of the Lord appears to Zachariah. And in true angelic visitation style there is a reaction of fear from Zachariah. And the angel tells him, "Do not be afraid because your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth will bear you a son and you shall name him, John."

He goes on to tell him that he will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at the birth of his son. I mean, can you imagine an angel telling you this about your own child, that he would be great in the sight of the Lord, that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb, that he would turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord, turning hearts of fathers toward their children to prepare a people fit for the Lord. This is like, wow! Zachariah is not only going to have a child after all those years of bareness and prayer, he's going to have this son, the prophet, John the Baptist.

And Zachariah response, how will I know this? And he reminds the angel about him, his advanced age and Elizabeth's advanced age. It's been said that Zachariah's reaction is less than stellar. He's prayed the majority of his married life to have a child. And now he's told his prayer has been answered that it's going to happen, and he doubts. Then Gabriel reveals himself to Zachariah as the angel who stands before God who was sent to announce the good news and then comes the rebuke.

We know that Zachariah is unable to speak until this actually happens as the angel says it would. It happens because to Zachariah the angel says, "You do not believe my words which will be fulfilled at the proper time." It really seems such a disappointment, a let down because we know the end of the story. But if we put ourselves in Zachariah's shoes it's not so difficult to believe. Even though Zachariah knew the story of Abraham and Sarah who were also advanced in age and barren and God fulfilled his promise of children to them or what about the others who were barren, and God intervened like Rebecca or Rachel or Hannah? All barren but God remembered them, and each bore a son.

Truthfully, I can so relate to Zachariah It's like God's favor is just too good to be true. Even knowing, all the miracles recorded in scripture and all the ones that are happening in our day and time we can ask the Lord to raise our level of expectation right now, regarding our own sufferings especially during this advent season. The Lord is not finished with us or our families,

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or our situations, our troubles, our finances, our poverty, our addictions, our sickness, or our uncertainties, whatever it may be. We ask right now during this Advent season, for the intercession of St. Zachariah. I can imagine what Zachariah felt upon exiting the temple. He was not only new, but I can only imagine a great sense of self disappointment, a sense of, I missed it!

But as we know, this is not the end of the story, Elizabeth conceives! This is an incredible love story of the faithfulness of this couple to one another and to God. Imagine Zachariah trying to explain to Elizabeth what happened in the temple on this special day of offering to God. I always wonder, did he write it down so Elizabeth could read it? We don't know, but we know that Elizabeth exclaims that the Lord has taken away her disgrace, her name, oath or the promise, is indeed remembered. Before we see the birth of John the Baptist there's another important announcement that takes place.

And it's to Mary who was betrothed to Joseph. It's an announcement that's to be seen in relation to the previous announcement to Zachariah. There's a unique situation that is unfolding. And it's our salvation. I'd like to mention just a few things about Elizabeth that we learn at the visitation of Mary. After Mary learns that she will be the mother of the savior of the world by the power of the Holy Spirit, it's Elizabeth who was mentioned by Mary by the same Angel Gabriel. Who tells her behold, Elizabeth, your relative has conceived a son in her old age. And this is the six month for her who was called barren for nothing will be impossible for God.

This is an amazing statement of truth about our God but also an added consolation and gift to Mary from the Lord. Kind of like a confirmation of the miracle of the conception of Jesus, the incarnate word. When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting at the visitation John leaps in the womb and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and gives us a truth about Mary that she had no way of knowing. Elizabeth gives us a word of knowledge. The Lord let her know that this most, blessed are you among women, Mary is blessed and blessed is the fruit of her womb. "How does this happen to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Elizabeth says.

She goes on, "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." This speaks loudly of who Elizabeth is. Elizabeth didn't say, oh Mary, I can't wait to tell you what happened to me. She understands that Mary is the mother of God because the Holy Spirit has revealed it to her. She knows something about Jesus, the Messiah who is merely cells in the womb of Mary. And in contrast to her husband, Elizabeth says of Mary, "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

Our conclusion about Elizabeth is that Elizabeth is full of God. She's full of the Holy Spirit. She's prophetic. She receives information from God that she had no way of knowing. She's full of knowledge but most importantly, she's humbled. It's not about her nor Zachariah it's about what God has done. We see Elizabeth heart's singing, to God be the glory. Now let's look at the final member of this holy family of Zachariah and Elizabeth.

God has shown His great mercy towards them and their neighbors and relatives all know this. And they are rejoicing with Elizabeth at the birth of John. And on the eighth day, the day of circumcision, they were going to name him Zachariah after his father. But Elizabeth says he will be called John. In this moment, Elizabeth is bearing the skepticism of her relatives and friends

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who protest that no other member of the family has been named this. So, they make signs asking Zachariah, who was not only mute but also deaf, what they were to call this child. And he wrote, John, is his name. And the scripture says, all were amazed because of Zachariah's obedience to the words of the angel to name him, John, his mouth is opened, and it begins to bless God and praise God.

This is how the story of Elizabeth and Zachariah and the infant John, closes. It's with this amazing canticle of praise of Zachariah, which a scripture tells us, he too, like Elizabeth, like John in the womb, like Mary, like Jesus, Zachariah now, we know is filled with the Holy Spirit. His prophesying and proclaiming this canticle became known as the Benedictus, which is prayed every day in the liturgy of the hours of the church.

It has been said that the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth is like a personal domestic Pentecost where one candle lights the other. And there's an explosion of grace and Mary and Jesus and Elizabeth and John are filled with the Holy Spirit and they praise magnifying God similar to what happens to the church on Pentecost. This praise is a spontaneous response of Mary as she sings her Magnificat. I'd like to offer too, that Zachariah experiences this personal Pentecost as the scripture says he too was filled with the Holy Spirit. As he writes John's name on the tablet, his tongue is unleashed, and he offers praise and he magnifies God as it was on Pentecost. All who were there, experiencing this unleashing of John's tongue knew that the hand of the Lord was upon John. They had witnessed a miracle of birth and a miracle of praise, much like the birth of the church and the miracle of praise at Pentecost.

I'd like to close this session with a prayer. Lord, let us see the promises that you have for us. Let the prophetic voice of praise well up in us, as it did in Zachariah. Grant us the grace of loosening our tongues to sing praise and to proclaim your faithfulness in the truth of the gospel at the birth of the Messiah.

Lord, we ask you to see us as we walk in these days of advent, give us clarity of what's most important. Bless us with gifts of life, the gifts of the Holy Spirit as you did Elizabeth and fill us with courage and zeal for the gospel as you did, John the Baptist. May our repentance lead us to freedom rejoicing in the fact that the impossible is possible with God. And he wants to do it in and through us. Amen. May God bless you.