

## Two Families

### Luke 1:5-25

In the first year of their marriage, with his wife sick with a fever, her husband insisted, "I'm taking you to the hospital for a complete checkup." In the second year of their marriage, when his wife got sick again, her husband announced, "I've called the doctor and he's going to rush right over." In the third year her husband says, "I'll make you something to eat. Do we have any soup?" And in the fourth year of their marriage, when his wife was sick again, her husband said, "After you've fed the kids and washed the dishes, you'd better hit the sack."

Family life. It can be the best of times. It can be the worst of times. So we begin a sermon series called "Family Life." There is much to learn from the families connected with the birth of Jesus. They faced infertility, rejection, frustration, loss, and so much more.

Luke 1:5 introduces us to two of these families. "In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah." This sermon has two parts. In the first part we highlight Herod's family. In the second part Zechariah's family will be our focus.

This Herod is also called "Herod the Great." Yes, it is the same Herod who, when Jesus was born, ordered the execution of all the boys under the age of two in and around Bethlehem. In fact, to say that Herod was a monster, is putting it mildly. He was born into a politically connected family in 73 BC, and was destined for a life of political hardball. He married ten times and ordered the execution of two of his wives and three of his sons. When Herod's father was poisoned by a political opponent, seething with revenge, he formed a treacherous plan. He invited his father's killers over for a dinner party. As they arrived he had them all murdered.

At the age of 69, Herod knew that he was dying and that no one would mourn his death. He longed for tears at his funeral, so he devised one final, desperate plan. He would bring together the top leaders of the land for a meeting in Jericho and, once they arrived, he would have his fortress gates locked. Just before the moment of his death, he would have all the leaders massacred. One way or

another, people would cry when Herod died. If not for him, than at least for popular leaders.

In the late 1800s two paddleboats on the Mississippi River left Memphis, Tennessee on a race to New Orleans. As his boat fell behind, an enterprising sailor took some of the ship's cargo and began throwing it into the ovens. When other sailors saw that the supplies burned just like coal, they threw more and more of it in. That boat ended up winning the race, but in the process that boat burned all its cargo.

That's a tragic picture of Herod's family. To win the race, eliminate every rival, and to be top dog Herod burned all the cargo. Herod destroyed his family.

"Thank God," I can hear us all say. "I'm not like Herod. I never raise an angry hand against a child. I pay my taxes and every now and then I put money into the offering plate. Once at a nursing home I even played bingo with my grandmother."

But, if we're honest with ourselves, we sometimes see in the mirror a little Herod staring back at us. There's a part of us all that would rather rule than serve, dominate rather than submit, and get ahead and win even at the expense of people in our family. We've all used words to slice and dice our spouses. We've made selfish decisions that have hurt our children and we have ignored clear warnings from God's word. And the result? Though family can be the best of times, too often family is the worst of times. So much for highlighting Herod's family. On to Zechariah.

"They had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years" (Lk 1:7). In Luke 1:25 Elizabeth describes her barrenness as "a disgrace among the people." In those days, if you had children you had everything. Conversely, if you had no children you had nothing. Zechariah and Elizabeth longed for a child. But it was too late. They are both too old. That ship sailed and that train left the station. There was no going back. "They were both well along in years." The pain of regret hits us most frequently when it comes to family.

Maybe you're like Zechariah and Elizabeth, wanting children but not able to conceive. Or maybe you're single, really wanting to be married, but it just hasn't happened. Maybe you're married,

but it hasn't turned out like you had hoped. Like Zechariah and Elizabeth we can all feel disgrace and shame among the people. End of story? No way! God intervened! He gave Elizabeth and Zechariah gifts—the same gifts he gives to our families. What are they?

Israel's three matriarchs Sarah (Gn 11:30), Rebekah (Gn 25:31), and Rachel (Gn 29:31) were all barren at one time. And so was Hannah, the mother of Samuel (1 Sm 2:5). All four women eventually had children. Elizabeth and Zechariah must have believed if God could do it before—not once, but four times—God can do it again!

Has family life left you frustrated or empty? Then hear this. If God was faithful to Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah, he will be faithful to you. God loves you no less. His promises for you in Jesus Christ never, ever end! You may have given up on you. But God will never give up on you. He replaces barrenness or brokenness with goodness and grace!

“[Zechariah] was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into **the temple** of the Lord and burn incense” (Lk 1:9). Zechariah had access to God's presence. And because of Christ's death, we all have access to God's presence. And this presence never disappoints!

God's presence is most obvious in the Holy Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ. The body that suffered and was crucified—that true body is present for you. The blood that was shed and spilled—that true blood is present for you. By the blood of Jesus you have access to the most holy presence of the most Holy God! And this real presence forgives all your failures involving family—every last one of them!

God gave Elizabeth and Zechariah a child. God's promise is that this child, John the Baptist, “will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children” (Lk 1:17). God's plan is to turn our hearts towards home, to replace vengeance and bitterness with forgiveness and love. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of the children towards their parents!

The story is told about a mother who came home from shopping. She looked in her living room and saw her four children sitting in a circle. As she got closer, the mother saw that her children were

playing with four of the cutest little skunks you've ever seen! The mother yelled, “Run, children, run!” So each child grabbed a skunk and began to run. After that? Let's just say that family life got really stinky!

Family life. It can be the best of times. It can be the worst of times.

The next time it gets real stinky in your family, don't fly off the handle like Herod—you could lose it all. Instead, trust in God's promises, God's presence, and God's plan. They are real. They are alive. And they work. Just look at Zechariah and Elizabeth! Amen.

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