

## Angel Gazing!

- *Not navel gazing!!*
- Word association with the angel images on the screen:
  - for each image, what words come to mind?
- Once we have a big list of adjectives, use the dramatic reading words to tell the story
  - what does this story (we'll read the full story later in the Bible) tell us about angels?
  - how did Zechariah feel when confronted by the angel Gabriel? (confused, afraid....)
  - did we come up with anything of what Zechariah felt when we looked at the angel pictures? - probably not!
  - our picture of angels is often very different from the biblical view!
  - angels are nothing less than messengers of Almighty God
- Today we'll be exploring further this encounter between God's messenger Gabriel and Zechariah

## Preparation

- Until you've had a child, I suspect you can't really realise how much work a small baby can be!
  - the number of things you need to have to hand - nappies, changing equipment, clothes, cot, toys, bags, buggies, car-seats, ....!
- Its not just the amount of work, or the number of bits of equipment, but **the quantity of preparation** which needs done beforehand too!
- Before the baby even arrives, you've got to:
  - make sure you've got this, and done that, and remembered the next thing...
  - **a whole new world!**
- **And that's just at the physical level...**
- Much of the preparation for the arrival of that small child was already well under way even before he or she is conceived:
  - **parents are already building the relationship** that will form the home into which that child will come, the love and care that will shape so much of that child's understanding of the world;
  - **their work and educational opportunities** are shaping the **physical environment** - how good a job, how much money, where will they live;
  - and even before that, **many of the things we do as parents we have learned subconsciously from our own parents!**
- The process of preparation for that baby stretches back over years, though only becomes obvious as the birth approaches

## Layers of Preparation

- There are, if you like, **many layers to the preparation:**
  - the obvious, surface layers
  - and the deeper, but perhaps even more important under-currents of preparation...
- Exactly the situation we find as we look at **how God prepared for the arrival of his son on earth and for his later ministry.**

### **There's the obvious preparation:**

- announcement of his birth to Mary and Joseph, them going to Bethlehem;
- Jesus' growth in "wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men";
- John the Baptist preaching in the desert, "Prepare the way for the Lord";
- And John's own birth to Zechariah and Elizabeth, the announcement of which we read earlier.

### **Behind that there's the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament:**

- *for example, Is.9:1,2,6,7 - "...but in the future he will honour Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan - The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this."*
- *Malachi 3:1, 4:5-6: "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come.... See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."*
- those just examples - prophecies of Jesus coming, and of John coming before him - there are many, many others!

**Behind the particular is the whole thrust of the Old Testament revelation:**

- of a God of justice and love, who hates our sin yet loves us and desires to draw us to himself - that most general preparing of the ground for Jesus' coming.
- That's the background, of **layer upon layer of God's careful preparation**, that we need to approach the whole Christmas story, and this passage at the start of Luke's gospel in particular

**Background**

- Luke opens his book in a style aimed at the cosmopolitan Greek reader - very similar to our own secular, sophisticated world
- **But then Luke immediately takes us into the rather obscure world of first century Judaism**
  - even his grammar is "**Palestinian**", reflecting the Aramaic/Hebrew language of those first involved in these events
- Zechariah was a priest:
  - a doubly blessed one, since his wife was from a priestly family
  - both he and Elizabeth were faithful, those who followed God's ways - despite the shame of no children
  - (popularly this was linked with disobedience, so possibly there were snide remarks in Elizabeth's hearing about "seems righteous, but no children...!")
  - and the service at Temple would have been the highlight of a priest's life
  - only two weeks in the year; and you only ever got to burn the incense once in your life, and maybe not even that - a huge privilege!
  - "*Most important day of his life!*"

**The Message!**

- Standing there, burning the incense, praying...
  - angel appears - **bursts in** - bringing fear and confusion!
  - angel (**messenger**) has a message for him from God - "**Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.**"
  - **but which prayer?**
  - the tense and construction in the Greek of what the angel says **implies one prayer at a particular time**
  - almost certainly the prayer Zechariah has just prayed, in the Temple
  - and so most unlikely a prayer for a child - that would be selfish and beneath the weighty responsibility of the priesthood
- That conclusion is borne out by Zechariah's disbelief at what has been promised!
- The prayer Zechariah would have been praying was for **restoration of Israel**, for God to again to redeem his people
  - that is what God is here preparing to do, after all!
  - god has heard your prayer - he is restoring and redeeming
  - **and he is going to do it starting with your son!**
- Names are significant:
  - **Zechariah** means "**Yahweh remembers**" (God remembers) - promises fulfilled;
  - "**John**" means "**the Lord is gracious**" - God could have chosen someone else, but graciously gives to Zechariah and Elizabeth not just the fulfillment of their hope for Israel, but also a son
  - also, God's treatment of people, the way of salvation he is preparing, is through grace - God treating us not as we deserve, but through Christ.
- Note too the background preparation God is giving to John in his priestly family:
  - **from childhood he will learn of God's ways**
- What form is God's preparation taking? The promise of the Lord's forerunner:
  - a great man in the Lord's sight;
  - from birth filled with the Holy Spirit;
  - one who will bring back (ie they've been away) to God;

- akin to the prophet Elijah (cf the Malachi promises...).
- All part of the big picture, the plan, God's purpose, to save his people
- The pace is picking up - the 400 years of quiet are over - God is on the move again - here is the announcement of the promised forerunner - game on - let the action commence - are you ready?

## Response

- Are you ready?
  - that is the implicit question to Zechariah - are you ready for all this?
- And his response - **no!**
  - he wasn't ready to trust - this was point blank refusal to believe, a spirit of disbelief rather than trust, demanding a sign
  - "I am an old man" is emphatic - you can't change things, says Zechariah
  - "I am Gabriel" (man of God), comes back the response - I come from the presence of God - this is for real - you'll get your sign all right, though not the kind of sign you might want!
- Narrative moves on - Zechariah comes out, can't speak - does he yet believe? - goes home - Elizabeth falls pregnant - stays out of sight for 5 months (bad morning sickness, or possibly mis-carried in past and didn't want to face all the well intentioned questioning...?)
  - its happening, its rolling, the Lord is at work

## Our Response

- Interesting background to the Christmas story - a bigger perspective on what God was doing - great - **but so what?**
  - that was then, not now!
- God is still at work today - we are at the brink of Christmas, chance to remember his coming, his taking on flesh for our sake, the good news of his birth, of "God with us"
- He is still preparing the ground for his Son, still getting us ready to receive Him.
- **We can either reject him or accept him**
- We can either stand with Zechariah, who was struck dumb for more than 9 months, or with Mary ("I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.") later in the chapter.
- Can accept or reject God's work of preparation:
  - reconciling fathers and children - family - together this Christmas? - communication, peace, patience, ...
  - the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - turning away from sin, that repentance that was John's characteristic message.
  - ready, expectant hearts this Christmas - open ears, open hearts - not closed by the materialism, or the gluttony, or the cynicism, or the pressured hedonism we are surrounded by.