



Sunday, Dec. 2, 2018

Sometimes a Word from God Can Turn Your World Upside-Down
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

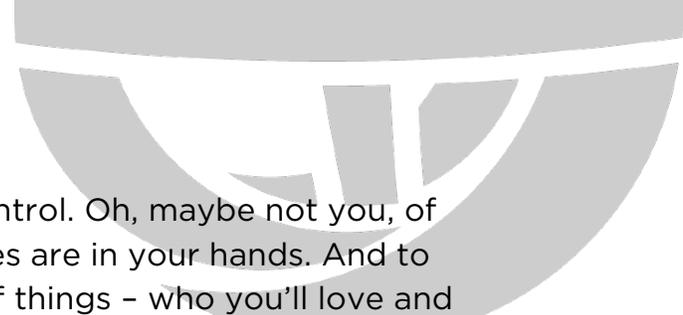
Luke 1:5-12 NRSV

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." ¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." ¹⁹The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

[Character Monologue: A Visit From An Angel]

I confess: I usually feel a twinge of guilt before carrying out an assignment. Not because I'm doing the wrong thing. But because I know I'm about to turn someone's world upside-down. And for some reason, that's not always welcome.



You see, you humans have a little issue with control. Oh, maybe not you, of course ... but let's be honest. You think your lives are in your hands. And to a point, you're right. You can choose all sorts of things – who you'll love and where you'll live and how you'll spend your time. You can even choose how to practice your faith or if you're going to believe in God at all. And most of the time that works out ok. You live your life as you see fit.

But every once in awhile, God has other plans. There's something special that needs to be done, or a different direction the world needs to go. And that's where I come in. I'm an angel, you see. One of the many intermediaries between heaven and earth. It's my job to deliver the message from God that those carefully-calculated plans someone has made aren't going to work out that way.

Take, for example, this lovely old couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth. They'd been passing their days quietly, faithfully, without much disruption at all. But God needed them to bring someone special into the world – a baby who would grow up to be a messenger in his own right. And so God sent me to deliver the word.

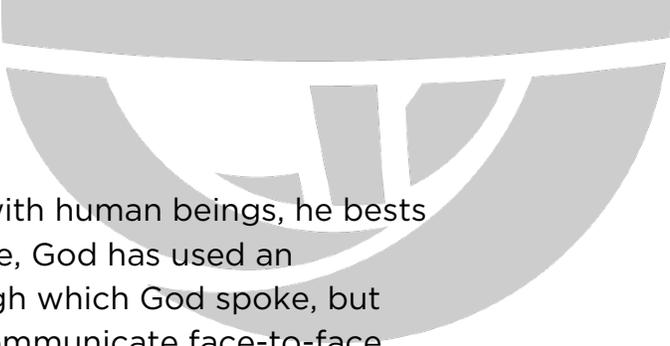
Now, you'd think Zechariah would have been thrilled to get this news. They'd all but given up hope of having children. And I chose my meeting time so carefully. Zechariah was alone, in the temple performing the honor of burning the incense offering to the Lord. If ever there was a holy moment, a time to receive a holy message, that was it.

I started out as I so often do: By telling him *do not be afraid*. After all, God is good. God's plans are good. But when you're not in control – when someone else shows up to deliver a wake-up call or a change of direction or a word from on high – well, that can evoke all sorts of emotions. Fear. Anger. Sorrow. Confusion. Disbelief.

That's exactly what happened with Zechariah. Maybe he didn't believe his eyes, or maybe the word that God was going to use his child to change the world was more than he could imagine. In any event, he couldn't quite grasp what I was telling him.



My fellow angels know all about this. For generations we've been tasked with bearing this kind of unbelievable news. After all, angel means



messenger. When God wants to communicate with human beings, he bests get their attention by sending one of us. Oh, sure, God has used an occasional burning bush or pillar of cloud through which God spoke, but most of the time, he uses someone like me to communicate face-to-face. And more often than not, people don't know how to respond. They laugh, like Sarah. They cower, like Daniel. They doubt, like Zechariah.

I can't say I blame them. It's hard to believe that God even notices what people do in their day-to-day activities. Sometimes God seems so far away that it's impossible to imagine that there are angels all around. But it's true. Pick up your Bible and you'll see that my fellow angels and I show up in more than half of its 66 books. And we don't just deliver messages. We right wrongs and watch over people and do our best to protect them from harm.

That's why I don't understand why people try so hard to control every little part of their lives. Don't you know that God is on your side? Don't you believe that God will never abandon you?

What if when an angel brings a message from God, people responded out of trust, not fear? Your life wouldn't be any less upside-down. But at least you'd know who was going to help you turn it right-side-up again.

Now, maybe you're one of those people who doesn't believe in angels. That's fair. But think for a minute: Have you ever had a total stranger help you out of a difficult circumstance? Or say something you really needed to hear? God works in mysterious ways, my friends. Sometimes God even uses people like you to do the work of angels. And when your life is turned upside-down by a word from God, well, my work is just beginning. Because God never leaves anyone to face a change of plans alone.

Zechariah may have doubted my message at first. He had to live with that awhile. For nine long months he silently wrestled and pondered and learned to accept that his life wasn't going to go the way he had planned. But he came to believe that it was God at work. God brought forth something new - something different than Zechariah could have ever imagined, yes. But God makes all things new. And when Zechariah opened his mind and heart to this new thing, he was changed. He even spread the word that this wasn't just a disruption. It was, indeed, good news.

