

A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

December 18, 2016

<http://aleteia.org/blogs/deacon-greg-kandra/best-christmas-ad-of-the-year-drop-everything-and-just-watch/>

This grandpa wanted to give the perfect gift to be able to speak to his offspring so they would understand him. This cute little ad is particularly potent around Christmas time. It points to all of the fears and joys of Christmas. The waiting. The journey. The work. The fear of will my gift be enough? Will it be appreciated and understood?

Today, we will read the story of Jesus' uncle, Zechariah. Leading up to the birth of Jesus, this man lived his life before God with more than occasional fear. Today we will look at an episode that might count as the pinnacle of his fear before God. All of this leads up to the birth of Christ, and I think it is more than a little pertinent to many of us in this room. Some of you fear the coming of Christmas, all the stress of family, preparation and travel. Fear of old wounds being torn open. Fear of desires not being met.

Here is a big one, fear of that moment when Christmas is over, because every year Christmas seems to offer the promise of satisfaction with new gifts, perfect parties and picture perfect family moments. Some of you have been around long enough to know that isn't the case. The new wears off the perfect gift. To bring it back to our story today, some of you have a fear of your relationship with God. Sometimes, like this video, it feels like another language is being spoken, and you wonder, "Am I doing enough? Am I good enough? Are the gifts I am offering to God what he wants?"

Luke 1:5-7

Per the direction of King David, there were 24 groups of priests, each consisting of six priestly families. Each group of priests would be responsible for one week of tending the temple. Each of the six families would take one of the days to be in charge at the temple. At

the temple there was a daily sacrifice of an unblemished lamb. This was a complete ceremony that included the killing of the lamb, the sprinkling of the blood and the burning of the incense followed by a spoken blessing to the people. The service would always conclude with the working priest emerging and speaking the Aaronic blessing.

We will find out later that Zechariah is advanced in age, which means he has been doing this for a lifetime, and not only has he been a practicing Jew for a lifetime, but a priest as well. He has had a first hand experience with this lamb and this ritual of sacrifice. Zechariah kept the law, and he meticulously honored the sacrifice of the lamb.

We find out in verse 7 that they did not have a child. They tried, they prayed and they cried. Having a child in this culture, an heir to carry on your name was everything. The command in the Garden of Eden was to be fruitful and multiply. The promise to Abraham and his family was that they would multiply, and if you did not, most people assumed God did not favor you. Even though Abraham and Sarah started out as childless, God looked down upon their plight and gave them a child. So you have to see this couple, in an honor and shame culture where people believed having a child was a sign of God's favor. You see a couple without a child and the man is a priest and everyone, at least in the back of their minds, is thinking they didn't do something right.

That had to leave a lingering fear in Zechariah. Had he been falling short his whole life. Not living up to God's standards. Making God mad on a regular basis. Maybe God hated Zechariah's gifts every time he offered a sacrifice. Maybe he knew the same passage we do where Cain and Abel both offered gifts to God but for some reason Abel's was pleasing and Cain's wasn't. You have to think about the fear that caused for a man who so desperately wanted to please God.

About twice a year, every priest had a week's worth of duties at the temple. In addition to that, all of the priests were called to the temple for big festival events, so five times a year, Zechariah showed up before God, and I am guessing a bit of fear came with him. Then we find out what happens next.

Luke 1:8-10

The burning of incense was a once in a lifetime job. Each priest could only do it once but was never guaranteed to do it. This was a big deal for one major reason; the altar where the incense was burned was right next to the Holy of Holies in the temple. This is where God's presence was thought to dwell. You could not get any closer to God than the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest actually went into the Holy of Holies and that was once a year. If you weren't a high priest, the closest you would ever be was the burning of incense. The incense was mixed with the blood of the sacrificial lamb and the burning symbolized this offering ascending to God. It also symbolized the prayers of the people outside ascending to God, and the priest was the intermediary making it all happen.

Lots would be cast and if it happened to be your week and your family, maybe you would be selected. But once again, this man advanced in age never received this honor. Further proof to himself and others that he seemed to be more like Cain than Abel. Something about the gifts he offered to God never measured up. He was never blessed with a child and he was never blessed with the chance to burn the incense until today.

Not only was this a high honor, but a high moment of fear. There was a protocol and process of offering the incense, and if it was violated, the results were dire. The sons of Korah mishandled the incense and they died, and many others with them. King Uzziah tried to usurp this role and he was plagued with leprosy. Offering the incense was no small deal. You have to imagine, with more than a little fear, the priest held it tighter than anything they had ever carried before. Walking slowly each step of the way. Shaking. Praying they didn't drop it or spill it or trip.

I was a waiter in college to help pay for my college education. I still remember training early on. They would pair you with a veteran waiter, and he or she would train you. I had never carried a tray before. The food trays were massive and could be loaded up with up to forty pounds of food and plates. It was more than a little unnerving because I had seen the

carnage that came when trays crashed. Food went everywhere. Plates crashed into a thousand pieces. Worst of all was the shame as the loud noise drew every eye in the restaurant to your failure. With that in mind, I had more than a little fear. The good news is you started with a drink tray. It was the size of a small dinner plate and my first time to carry it was for a table of two, a middle-aged son and his elderly mother. She ordered ice tea and he ordered a beer. No sweat. I got the drinks and brought them to the table. I took the tea off first to give to the elderly mom, then I proceeded to the beer. The problem was I had placed the drinks on opposite sides of the small tray, and once I took off the tea the tray was like a tiny seesaw. The weight came off one side and the beer went crashing into the table. With this small task and small tray, I had just spilled beer on an old lady. To my relief, there was no anger or yelling. In fact, true story, the son said, "Don't worry about it. She smells like beer all of the time anyways."

That was a small tray with small stakes and small consequences. Can you imagine the fear of this moment? Men have died because they did this incorrectly and you only get one chance to do it right. Fear would rule the day. What if God doesn't like my gift? What if I mess it up? If I mess it up, then the sacrifice won't ascend to heaven. If I mess it up, the prayers won't make it up to God. This was a big moment. Which makes the following passage all the more potent.

Luke 1:11-12

This was a terrifying moment for many reasons. First of all, angels were rare sights and if the book of Revelation is to be believed, angels aren't chubby babies or Hallmark-looking movie stars in flowing robes. They are other worldly and overwhelming beings. Every time they show up in the Bible, the passage always start with, "Do not fear," which means they are probably fear-inducing just by the way they look. On top of that, Zechariah is doing this fearsome task of burning the incense by the door to the Holy of Holies. This must mean that he messed up, that his gift wasn't pleasing to God and this angel was here to deliver swift justice for his ineptitude. Instead, we read this.

Luke 1:13-17

“Do not fear, in fact rejoice because you will be receiving a son.” Not only that, he has a special place in God’s story. Not only that, he will be a prophet. Not only that, he will prepare the way for the Messiah. Whoa. You will be given a son, who was prophesied about in scripture, a forerunner to the coming Messiah. A man, who in his own right will be a great man of God, but who is essential to God’s redemption. Whoa. What do you do with that? Most of us would probably do what Zechariah did and respond with more fear.

Luke 18-20

The gist of his response is more fear. How is this possible? Here is what is great about this passage, Gabriel’s response and the verdict handed down to Zechariah. In the past, I have always read this as a punishment when in fact I am now certain it was a gift. In the past, I thought God’s response was punitive. If you don’t believe me then I will take away your voice. That is a bit weird and capricious for many reasons. I guess you could view it that way because he would be unable to speak the Aaronic blessing. He would be unable to speak to congregants about their problems, but he didn’t take anything away that was essential for living. He didn’t maim him or leave him with a disease. I think it was a gift because he took away the one thing that might have been keeping him in fear, the one thing that allowed him to be quiet and listen to God.

Priests as you know made their living when they spoke, while this is not directly analogous to today. Priests were spiritual teachers for people. They were called to represent God to people, to intermedate for God to other people, to speak for God. As a pastor, I can safely say, some people of my tribe often speak up for God so often we can forget to listen. So God gave him this gift, be quiet and watch me work.

For his whole life, Zechariah had found himself working on God’s behalf, offering gifts to God and offering gifts on God’s behalf. Trekking to the temple for work year after year.

Doing. Speaking. Working. All of this work paired with all of this fear, and God stops him and says, "I have a gift for you."

Just as often as people have a fear of giving gifts, there are more people who have a fear of receiving gifts. Some people just don't know how to react, but there is a group of people who don't know how to receive gifts. John Amodeo is a doctor with a PhD and MFT in the Bay Area who has written several books. I found an article of his especially valuable. He states five reasons that people have a hard time receiving gifts. 1) Defense against intimacy. If we receive the gift without question, it will deepen a relationship whether we like it or not. 2) Losing control. When we give, we are in the driver's seat, but when we receive, we are vulnerable and weaker. 3) Fear of strings attached. This is connected to the idea of control and power. When you give, you are in the driver's seat but when you receive, you can feel beholden or owing. 4) We believe it is selfish to receive. 5) We might have a self-imposed pressure to reciprocate. If you can't freely receive a gift, you might feel like you need to give a gift to someone to make things even.

Now then, do you think any of these might have been pertinent for a Jewish priest? A man used to giving could appear noble, but a man unwilling to receive could be seen as equally unhealthy. It's one thing to be willing to work in order to grow, but it's quite another to receive, to humbly receive something you have not worked for. Does this sound pertinent? If it is pertinent for Zechariah, I think it is pertinent for 2016 in Silicon Valley. We live in what is probably the greatest meritocracy in the land. Pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. Constantly working to get ahead, unwilling to slow down. Giving the gift of work and time to the salt mines of Silicon Valley.

What if the key to whole life is not most people's fear of giving gifts but rather of receiving them? In an article by John Swansburg called *The Self-made Man*, the author discusses several successful people and the often missed factors that contributed to their success. Namely, things other than the man himself such as little gifts along the way that he received that accounted for big pieces of his success. In this article, he points to the misappropriation of the phrase "pick yourself up by your own bootstraps." He said this is

an obvious corruption of the original meaning. Pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps is an impossible task not a feat of reliance. He says, "You can no more pull yourself up by your own bootstraps than you can by your shoelaces."

Not only is there a myth of self-reliance, but the great irony is that the phrase often used to describe it points to the very impossibility of it.

The whole key of life is not people's fear of giving gifts but their fear of receiving them. The only way I think Zechariah could hear this is when he was given the gift of silence, the gift to sit back and watch God work to bring a new life to an elderly barren couple. To listen for months to whatever he might have been able to hear for the first time. Then we see this:

Luke 1:57-65

His time of silence is up. He obediently names the child, John, which means God is gracious. This man has been changed, and if that wasn't clear enough, listen to the first recorded words that he spoke.

Luke 1:67-75

The key phrase comes at the end. The early verses tell you all of the motivations and behind the scenes work. God is bringing deliverance and salvation. God is showing mercy and keeping his covenant but verse 74 has the two main purposes, to rescue us and to enable us to serve him without fear. In one fell swoop, he has freed us to learn to receive and give gifts well. We receive rescue then we can serve freely, no longer like a waiter with a small tray or a priest shaking with incense. When you realize your rescue is by God's hand alone, it changes how you serve. If God's free gift were full of stipulations and attached strings, it would mean your service would be fraught with complications, worries about doing it right and earning your way, but a free gift leads to free service. A free gift leads to free worship. A free gift leads to a free relationship.

These are the first words prophesied over Jesus. It was a snapshot of the ministry and new life he would bring. Here is what is amazing to me, Zechariah never got to speak his blessing over the people. Ten months earlier he emerged from the temple after having done his work, and he was supposed to speak a blessing over the people. This is his blessing, the offer of free rescue and free service. Free from fear. Free from guilt.

My question for you today is simple. Are you worried about the gifts you give to God? Are you struggling with guilt that you never measure up and that God is consistently angry with you? Are you importing your Silicon Valley work ethic into your faith experience? Very closely related to this is whether you have wrapped your brain around the free gift of grace. Are you fearful of the intimacy? Are you afraid of losing control? Do you fear attached strings? Do you think you will have to reciprocate? Do you feel selfish if you do receive? If you are a follower of Jesus, and you are obsessing over what you can do for him, then you have missed the point. Maybe you need to experience the gift of Zechariah. A bit of silence to stop striving and watch God work.

We cannot start today by thinking about what we can offer to God but rather what he offered to us. If you can start there, it changes everything. That's why we have a Messiah in a manger. That's why we have a carpenter on the cross. Those are gifts to us. Will you open these gifts this Christmas season?