Sad Things Happen to Good people:
the announcement of John the Baptist's birth
Luke 1:5-25

I want to try and set the scene a bit for what we've just read. Five hundred years before these events the Jews had returned from exile in Babylon and rebuilt the temple and Jerusalem. But since that time God had been silent. There had been no prophetic revelation, no word from the Lord, no Isaiah or Jeremiah, no Habakkuk or Malachi to declare God's word. Israel was a nation living in darkness, under Roman imperial rule and as v5 here makes clear under the murderous tyranny of Herod. And the promises of the Old Testament that as a nation they would be a blessing to every other nation must have seemed a very distant dream.

It's in that context that Luke opens his gospel and introduces us to this couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who knew they weren't getting any younger. It is an unlikely place for God to kick-start His plan for saving the whole world.

Sad things happen to good people
Zechariah and Elizabeth were good people. Luke says in v6 that they were both righteous before God. Now you get some people who are righteous in their own eyes, and then there are some who appear righteous in the sight of others, but behind closed doors their wives, or husbands or children could tell a different story.

But not Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were righteous before God. When God looked upon them He liked what He saw. And that wasn't just because they came from good stock, a priest marrying the daughter of a priest, it wasn't just their godly heritage, because it's possible to have that and it mean nothing to you. No, Luke says in v6 that they walked 'blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord'. Here was a couple, who knew what it was to walk with God, and they had lived that out. They weren't hypocrites, they didn't say one thing and do another, they were trusting in God's righteousness and goodness and mercy and grace.

And yet… and yet they were childless. They had endured years of infertility: years of infertility in a culture where infertility was shameful. And some of you may know something of their pain and grief. Elizabeth describes it movingly in v25 as 'my reproach among the people.' In all likelihood, the gossip against this good, godly couple was that they were cursed by God.

But they weren't. They were good people. If anyone would have made good parents they would. If anyone would have brought their children up to know and love and serve God and others, they would. And no doubt the local oiks, who couldn't care a fig for God and his law, they had no problem conceiving. They bred like rabbits. But not this good, godly couple. As Luke says in v7 'They had no child, because Elizabeth was barren.'

And here's the question: Why? Why do sad things happen to good people? Why do people who would make excellent parents struggle with infertility, why does a young mum die of cancer or a loving father and husband be left brain damaged after an accident?

Well, Zechariah and Elizabeth have something to teach us here. Because this wasn't as a result of any sin on their part. This wasn't some judgement from God because of sin. Luke goes out of his way to point that out. Sure, there are times when that can happen, when we reap what we sow and pay the price for our own stupidity, but not here.

Neither was this some sort of demonic attack that Zechariah and Elizabeth were supposed to rebuke and stand against. Can that happen? Can suffering and sickness come from the enemy? Absolutely, the story of Job makes that clear, and all sickness and death ultimately finds its origins in satan's hands. But here with Zechariah and Elizabeth the enemy is nowhere to be seen.

Church, this was God's doing. Their years of infertility and the shame Elizabeth had to bear and the sneers Zechariah had to endure, was God's doing, until his perfect timing came to pass. And we want to look everywhere and blame anything other than God, and yet the Sovereign Ruler of the universe who holds our lives in His hands, and loves us with a love beyond measure, works everything out for our good. And sometimes we don't understand it, and sometimes we wish it was different and sometimes we struggle to discern His path through the tears. But He is in sovereign control and He knows what He's doing.

Why do sad things happen to good people? Because we live in a fallen world, a world in which God is working out His plan of salvation to win a people for himself and sometimes He uses means we don't understand at a time we cannot comprehend, just as he does with Zechariah and Elizabeth. But it is as we keep our eyes fixed on His sovereign plan, the unfolding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that He's working everything out and it is for our good, that we can say with Paul in Romans 8:18 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.' It was only afterwards, as it dawned on Zechariah and Elizabeth what God had done for them that they understood it: that their years of infertility and shame and grief were as nothing in comparison to the glory that was to be revealed, the glory of the coming Messiah, and the part their son was to play in that. That was why sad things happened to this good couple.

It's not about your faith

Zechariah was a priest and was chosen by lot to offer the incense in the Holy Place. This was a once in a lifetime event. This was the pinnacle of his career. He had never been chosen before and he would never be chosen again. And God waits for this moment, the moment when he lights the incense that represents the prayers of the people, He waits for this moment to speak to him. And you and I might at times be tempted to think stuff just happens and it happens by chance and we're at the mercy of events, but even in the details God is sovereignly working it out

And Gabriel appears and Zechariah is terrified. But Gabriel tells him in v13 'do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard'. Now, what's Zechariah

been praying for? Had he been standing there praying for a child, using this moment to pray that? Or conscious of his role as a priest was he praying for God's deliverance to come to Israel: he get's his moment before God and he wants to pour out his heart for his people? Or is Gabriel referring to the years of long prayer Zechariah has offered up in the past? Whichever it was as one commentator (Bock) has said 'God's answers sometimes come at a surprising time, in a surprising place and in a surprising way' and Zechariah doesn't recognise the answer when it comes.

And he tells the angel 'we can't have a baby! Man, I'm old, and she's old. How can that happen?' Now those of you who may be struggling to believe a story with angels in it, I just want you to note Zechariah's words, because this isn't fanciful make believe. Zechariah, and Luke who reports this, know that old people don't have babies. They're not stupid, even doctors know the facts of life, and Zechariah needs to be convinced as much as anyone else. And in v18 he says 'how shall I know this?' Give me a sign, because I'm struggling to believe this.

Church what I want you to see here is that the answer to Zechariah's prayer, whether it was for deliverance or for a child, doesn't come because he is some mighty man of faith. Gabriel doesn't appear and Zechariah goes 'yes, I knew it, I knew you'd reward my faith.' No, his response is 'I don't believe this can happen, I need a sign'. But notice also that this miracle doesn't get cancelled because of Zechariah's lack of faith. Gabriel doesn't hear Zechariah's doubts and go, 'ok, if you don't believe we're calling this thing off, I'll be back when you've got the faith, bye!'

No, this was God's sovereign moment. This was His perfect timing: in v20 Gabriel says these events 'will be fulfilled in their time.' In God's time. And you get these folk who will tell you that you or your loved one doesn't get healed or doesn't get the answer to their prayer because you or they lack faith. Well, tell that to Zechariah and Elizabeth! Because if that was the case there would have been no John the Baptist. All Zechariah has is this tiny, mustard seed faith, the faith that clings to God's promises but doesn't quite believe it when they come to pass. The faith that prays but fails to recognise the answer to those prayers even when an angel brings it. It's the faith of the man who brought his son to Jesus to be healed and in response to Jesus' statement that 'all things are possible for one who believes' says 'I believe; help my unbelief.'

You see you can get to the point that what you're doing is putting your faith in your faith: it's all dependent on you. But that's not where your faith should rest. You put your faith in a sovereign, good creator, in your heavenly Father. You throw yourself upon Him, in all your weakness and lack of faith and you say 'God I believe but my faith, it's tiny, it's no bigger than a mustard seed, but I'm not looking to myself or my faith, I'm looking to you'.

Salvation's coming

Having told Zechariah that Elizabeth is going to have a son, Gabriel says in v14 'And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.' What God is doing in giving you a son, goes way beyond simply blessing you as a family. Joy

is going to come to many. And in v15 onwards Gabriel begins to spell out why. He tells Zechariah that John, his son, will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. Now in the Old Testament the Spirit would come and go and he was only ever given to a few. But from John onwards things will be different: he's the bridge from the Old Testament to the New Testament where the Spirit indwells all who believe in Jesus, equipping every saint for service in the church and the world.

And Gabriel spells out what John's ministry is going to be. In v16 he says 'he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.' He's going to call the nation back to God and in v17 he says 'he will go before Him [before God] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.'

John's ministry is going to be a ministry that calls folks to repentance. It's going to bring about reconciliation vertically between God and the people and horizontally within families. But it's going to go even further than that. John is going to prepare the people for something even greater. He's going to go before God and make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

And as yet, Zechariah and Elizabeth could have no clue about what that would mean. All they know is what Gabriel tells them, in v19 'I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and bring you this good news'- this gospel. 'And it's good news for you, it's good news for families, it's good news for the people of Israel and it's good news for the nations. The 400 years of silence are over. God is on the move and your son is going to prepare the way for Him, for God, when He comes'. And we know what they didn't know: that when God came it was as a man, Jesus, who rather than coming as a conquering king, came as a servant, to bear our sins and to forever reconcile us to God.

But I want you to see how this ends: Zechariah returns home, Elizabeth conceives and she says in v25 'Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.' Within the vast scale of what God was unveiling first with John, then with Jesus, to Israel and then to the nations, the global purpose and scope of the gospel, we have this lady, Elizabeth, to whom God has been gracious. Among all his concern for the nation and the nations God demonstrates His loving concern for this aging lady.

God's grace is to you. Yes it is to the many, but it is also to you, to take away your reproach, and he has done that by sending Jesus to die in your place, to set you free from your past, to give you hope and a future. A hope that endures even through the sad things because it looks to a glory yet to come.

As we finish I want to say something to those of you who are a bit older here. And I know that in a church like this were most of us are a bit younger you can feel that, and you can begin to look around and think, man I'm getting on. Listen, let Zechariah and Elizabeth encourage you this morning. God didn't choose some hip young guy with his pants on the ground or some trendy glammy chick to be

John the Baptist's parents, he chose a couple who in Luke's words were advanced in years. There is no sell by date in your usefulness in the kingdom of God. There is no scrap heap where Jesus puts older models he's grown tired of. And you may not like this, but there's no retirement home either. Campbell McAlpine used to tell a story about a man who wanted to be a missionary and went for an interview with a missions agency. At the end of the interview the panel asked the man if he had any questions and he said he had one: 'what's the pension scheme like? What are retirement benefits like? Are they good?' To which the chairman looking at him said, 'o we have an excellent retirement package, we have a pretty little graveyard right next door.' You are never past it. There's no retirement. You are always useful to the master if you make yourself available.

It doesn't matter what your age is, God is looking for men and women who keep trusting him with mustard seed like faith even when life hurts and the way is hard, but who are looking for and willing to be a part of His plan in Jesus Christ to win the nations to himself.