**Sunday 11th December 2016 Message**

**Expect to be chosen for – Mission Impossible**

Joke – trying to get a message across

***Scripture – Luke 1:5-25***

**Introduction**

When it appears God has not answered your prayers for a long time, and suddenly He turns up will you be ready for what He wants to say?

When God seems to have been silent, even inactive, and things are going terribly wrong and contrary to His promise, what will you be expecting if anything?

When all your dreams and hopes seem to being dashed left right and centre, when there is an ache in your heart for something different, will you still be ready for His mission impossible?

**Soundtrack**

Just like in the TV series it seems like sometimes God sends a message, this is your mission if you choose to accept it, and poof the tape self destructs. That’s what it must have seen like to the people of Israel when Malachi gave the final word of God for 400 years.

**Slide *Mal 4:5-6 "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. 6 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." NIV***

**Slide Click** 400 years nothing.

Which part of the prophecy were they expecting, that Elijah would come, or that the land would be struck with a curse.

The nation was under Roman occupation. A puppet ruler, Herod the Great, was trying to control their every action to make money. He was so suspicious of people trying to take over he killed anybody he saw as a threat including his own sons. He had killed the High priests of the time and would soon install his own choice of High Priests Annas an Caiphas who were in place when John the Baptist started his ministry and were involved in Jesus being crucified. People dare not speak out for fear of their life.

So I wonder if the receipt of the message that Zachariahs son would be the fulfilment of the prophecy of Malachi seemed like Mission Impossible, and the tape would self destruct and then another period of waiting might occur.

**Herod**

Every verse, even word of Scripture provides us with information and revelation, and it is too easy to pass over some and miss their significance. As we walk through this incredible passage in Luke let me encourage you in your reading of the word to ask questions of the Spirit what is the significance of things in the text.

We are looking at a passage where God is like the young man in my silly story at the start, leaning on the intercom, and wanting to kiss Israel again, pleading for permission to do so, as He sends the word to Zachariah via Gabriel. It is recorded for everyone in Luke’s gospel that there is doubt and fear, so that when you hear God wanting to being intimate with His people you can be the sister, the father who will say for goodness kiss Him or I will.

Our passage opened declaring ***“There in the days of Herod, the king of Judea”*** may just seem to be a piece of historical background, but is a very important piece of information. Herod ushered in the time when the kingship of Israel was no longer of the lineage of David, and the High Priesthood of Israel was no longer of the lineage of Aaron.

This is the fulfilment of a prophetic word spoken by Jacob, before David and Aarons time, in ***Gen 49:10 The scepter or leadership shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh [the Messiah, the Peaceful One] comes to Whom it belongs, and to Him shall be the obedience of the people. AMP***

This point in history was the exact time for Shiloh (the sent one, the peaceful One) to arrive. Yet when you are in the midst of things contrary to Gods word, and seemingly getting worse, it is not always easy to expect the fulfilment of His promise from 1900 years ago, let alone 400 years ago.

Herod marked a significant landmark in Israel’s history, he changed the architectural face of the nation as well as its direction. If you have visited Israel you will see evidence of many of his buildings which have been excavated. They are easy to identify, he was such a showoff, he had his name inscribed on every stone. He built the biggest Temple Israel had ever seen, with cut stones weighing over one ton, and everyone of them had his name on. Everywhere you went in that temple you saw Herods names, it was an edifice to him rather than God. It is this temple to which Jesus would have gone at the feasts, and turned the tables over in, and Peter and John went to and met a lame man on the way.

**Zachariah a certain priest**

It was in this temple that we find “a certain priest” chosen by lot to minister in. Why is he called a certain priest? Because he is one of many 18000, no one special in many senses, he was not the high priest as they had been removed at the time according to historical records. He was a descendant of Aarons sons Eleazer, named Abia (Abijah).

He was chosen by lot, not as we would think today a form of gambling, but a means that in Jewish history determined the will of God. The fact that it fell to Zachariah on this day in history lets us know God can use any means He choses to ensure His plans are fulfilled.

The passage also tells us he was married to a daughter of Aaron the father of High priests, whose name was Elizabeth which also happened to be the name of Aarons wife.

Now you can see God has set the whole thing up, He is intent on restoring the priestly line in the form of John the Baptist, to precede the return of the ruling line of king David in the form of Jesus.

Not only do these two people chosen to be Johns parents have the right lineage, they also have a very unusual quality that God requires of those He is likely to choose for Mission Impossible.

***Luke 1:6 And they both were righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. AMP***

Like Noah, they were found to be of the right stuff to be the parents of John the Baptist. They were not without sin, but they were extraordinary in their pursuit of following Gods word.

This is the high calling of parents, grandparents, and the church to raise a generation for mission impossible in the future. Your offspring and the generations that follow will be influenced by the example you set in pursuing the word and will of God. You have no idea what God will do through your generational offspring but you have a duty to set them on the path to holiness.

**Barrenness does not stop God**

Verse 7 tells us that Zach and Elizabeth are both well advanced in years and that they had no children. Whilst these two had the right lineage, and the right character, for raising the return of the priestly line to prepare the way of the Lord. They did not have the natural resources to bear a child. Who would want a child at an age when your body is not built to cope with giving birth, and you will not have the energy to bring up a child. Let alone bring up a child as weird and contentious as JB would be in the time of Herod.

God underlines His choice, with miraculous interventions in the course of history. Repeatedly in the OT we see God enabling barren people to produce children. Long lost dreams are never lost in the hands of God, all that you dream of, He can provide. Look around you can see people in this room today who never thought they would have what they have today or have experienced in their more senior years.

I am reminded of Hannah praying for a child in the Temple in her barren old age, and God giving to her Samuel the prophet, who she gave back to the Lord. The similarities in his life and Johns are incredible, both were given to a Nazarite vow, both challenged the sin in the nation of their time, both were fearless, both given to godly parents.

**Burning Incense**

Whilst there is theological debate as to whether the altar of incense (v9) that Zach was chosen to attend was in the holy place, or elsewhere in Herods Temple (because he was not a high priest). It still remains that the fact is a large gathering (v10) was praying outside the temple at the time of incense which normally occurred on the Sabbath when the HP was ministering at the Altar of Incense.

I believe it is significant that Gabriel appears at the altar of incense when prayers are being made. Where else would you expect and angel, a messenger of God to appear, than in the place of prayer, the prayer closet, the set time of prayer.

Of course God answers prayer as we go about our daily business, but there is something special about the time and place of prayer that scripture and the life of Jesus reveal to us as a necessary routine.

**Slide *Rev 8:3-5 Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. 4 And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand. NKJV***

**What was Zachariah praying for?**

The scripture does not tell us for certain what Zach was praying for. As a priest before the altar of incense his duty was to:

**Slide *Malachi 1:9 But now entreat God's favour, that He may be gracious to us. While this is being done by your hands***

and

**Slide Click *Numbers 6:25-26 The Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace***

I wonder if he slipped in a prayer for a son and that’s why Gabriel said “Your prayer is heard”? Is that why Zach was troubled, because he strayed from fulfilling his duty to pray for the people?

It may be, but given his commitment to fulfilling the law and his righteousness I suspect that God was responding to the specific request that He be gracious to the people. Afterall, the child God was about to give Him was to be called **Slide Click** John (the grace of the Lord)

Isn’t this the truth about intercessors who stand in the gap and pray on the behalf of others, without a selfish motive, that God gives them and moresome, the very things they pray for others. Remember Job getting twice he had before, when he prayed for his friends.

**Troubled and fearful.**

Verse 12 tells us that when the angel appeared on the right side of the altar, the place of delegated authority in the heavenlies, Zacharias was troubled. Well so he should be no one else was meant to be in the holy place at the time of incense. Mary was troubled when Gabriel turned up to see her, but Zach also experienced ***fear falling upon him.***

That is a strange expression, usually associated with the onset of a spirit of fear, possibly because he was afraid that he had done something wrong in fulfilling his duties. Religious people can be haunted by a spirit of fear of getting things wrong.

Good news is proclaimed by the angel, your wife is going to give you a son and you shall call him The Grace of God. I think Zach missed that little subtlety in the message. He also missed you will have joy and gladness and a whole load of other things.

His response is in marked contrast to Marys, she said inquisitively “how can this be”, he said doubtingly “how will this be”

**Slide** ***Luke 1:18 And Zachariah said to the angel, By what shall I know and be sure of this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years. AMP***

Gabriel did not respond to Zach “Nothing is impossible with God”

In fact I think he was a little peeved with Zach, if angels can be peeved. Verse 19 “I am Gabriel” almost “do you know who you are talking too?”. Even my name means “God is great” and I am His messenger sent to you. How dare you question this great message.

Now don’t be too hard on Zach, how often when God has given you a message, have you thought even if not spoken it out loud, well I can’t see how that will happen given the current circumstances.

The problem for Zach was that he spoke out his doubt, and the words of our mouth, can kill our expectation and position to receive the will of the Lord. Some of us need to be silenced by an angel from time to time, to stop us speaking negatively against the word of the Lord.

**On secret mission**

I believe that sometimes when God gives you a mission, a destiny, a call, a promise it may be appropriate to keep stum about it to others. Zach was struck dumb not only so he did not air doubt, but so that other people could not mock and speak doubt about the plans of God and how ludicrous they may seem in the natural. Notice that in verse 24 Elizabeth also hid herself when she became pregnant.

Can you imagine some of the things people may have said to Elizabeth when she was showing. “Oh no not at your age. That’s really dangerous you could die in childbirth. How are you going to cope bringing up a little one at your age.” If it was today it may even be suggested by friends and medics that you abort the baby.

Elizabeth however, recognised that God was being gracious to her and giving her her hearts desire.

What would Zach have said to people about the message from Gabriel if he could speak and had come to believe that it was going to happen. “Hey guess what I am going to have a son and he is going to be full of the Holy Spirit and turn the nation around”. You can imagine the ridicule that he would receive, the seeds of doubt that would be thrown at him. Let alone the threat that this child may be a problem to a very suspicious and tyrannical Herod.

Mission Impossible – Mission Secret.

**The secrets out**

***Luke 1:57-58 Now the time that Elizabeth should be delivered came, and she gave birth to a son. And her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy on her, and they rejoiced with her.***

When the promise is birthed, the doubt is removed. The people rejoiced as Gabriel had said.

***Luke 1:62-65 And they inquired with signs to his father [as to] what he wanted to have him called. Then Zachariah asked for a writing tablet and wrote, His name is John. And they were all astonished. And at once his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he began to speak, blessing and praising and thanking God. And awe and reverential fear came on all their neighbours; and all these things were discussed throughout the hill country of Judea.***

When the promise is named, the silence is removed. It took Zach to confirm the word of the Lord to release his tongue to tell of the plans of God. Nine months is a long time to be silent about a word from the Lord, but there are times when it is necessary.

**Destinies filled and unfulfilled**

John grew up as a Nazarite. He lived in the desert. His food was weird, His dress was weird. So typical of a prophetically gifted person.

**Slide *Luke 3:2-4 In the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the Word of God [concerning the attainment through Christ of salvation in the kingdom of God] came to John son of Zachariah in the wilderness (desert). And he went into all the country round about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance (of hearty amending of their ways, with abhorrence of past wrongdoing) unto the forgiveness of sin. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, The voice of one crying in the wilderness [shouting in the desert]: Prepare the way of the Lord, make His beaten paths straight.***

***AMP***

John fulfilled the words of Gabriel and the prophet Isaiah as he began his ministry. It is worth noting that Luke,s account of the beginning of Johns ministry was in the time of two new high priests I mentioned earlier, Annas an Caiaphas these two Jews chosen by Herod probably as spies and lackies, strangely had names that meant Annas (he who gives humble answers) and Caiaphas (he who diligently seeks), should have been people who believed John and found Christ as the Messiah. Yet they played a role under Herod that led to the death of both these men. You can be given a destiny and choose not to fulfil it.