

BELPRES  CHURCH

Sermon Title: Troubled Redemption

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Scripture:

Luke 1: 5-6, 12-15, 18-19, 24-25

⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹ The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.

²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

Transcript:

Bow your heads with me. Father in heaven, thank You so much for this day, Lord. We submit this time to You, Lord, for worship and praise. May You open our eyes and our ears and our hearts to hear your word, Lord, as we've already had worship to be able to prepare us, Lord. May we continue in soaking in your Holy Spirit, your beautiful and your glorious name. We all said together, amen.

All right. They told you about the app, so we are going to have some interaction with the app. I have my phone here to see some responses that we have. In the app there's a question that I'd like to hear about you guys. I'd like to learn you guys a little bit more. The question is there, what are some of the fears you have surrounding the holidays? You can be fun with it, light with it. You know, I don't like potato salad and that's what my aunt brings all the time, and I'm afraid that I have to eat half a pound of it. Whatever. Whatever it may be that your fears are.

And don't worry. I'm going to come back to them at the end of the sermon, and I won't say who you are. I'll just say the fear, so you can have some sort of, is the word "anonymity?" Is that the word, "anonymity?" Look at that, man. I'm learning English. I like it. All right. Anonymity, meaning nobody's going to know who you are, for those of you who doesn't know English like me. All right. Okay, so today I'm going to talk about shame, and I'm just going to tell you right now, I'm going to be a little bit over place, because I'm going to share with you guys one of the most painful and most traumatic experiences in my life as a kid. My brain has a hard time putting all this together, and it's around shame.

As a kid, I went from between low income, inner city, diverse public schools to East Side private Christian schools. In my inner city public school, the Caucasians or white people, they seemed like the minority. In every class there's like one or two or three of them, but the rest of us, we were all from every nationality known to man there. But then in the third grade at nine years old, when I went to the East Side over here at a private Christian school, well, now I was hanging around a bunch of kids who were middle to upper class kids who were

predominantly all Caucasians. They were all white. There was only two brown brothers in the class, me and one other dude, six foot whatever Black dude.

So the tables had flipped. It was a huge culture shock for me. Hi. I know you're trying to get somebody's attention over here. You're being called, sir, to the front over here, row 2, 16A. It's like when you lost a baby, 16A please. All right, back to the sermon, back to the lecture at hand. What was I talking about?

Your school.

My school, there you go. Only two brown people, there we go. All right. Only two brown cats in my class, so what I realized that I was very different from these students. I realized right off the bat that I was not like everybody else. My parents didn't speak English. I was poor. I did not have stories of the yearly family skiing trip. I did not have stories of places that they had vacation homes in, or they were flying to this place or that place for vacation over the summer. The last time I'd been on a plane was when I was brought illegally to America. That was the last time I'd been on a plane.

So I clearly knew that I was very different from everybody there. And in recognizing that, acknowledging that difference, that built up a lot of fear in me, a lot of fear and rejection, the possibility of rejection, that if these kids just knew my life, maybe they wouldn't like me. They would reject me. They would make fun of me, potentially even bully me. And so this fear that built up on me turned to shame. I was ashamed of who I was. I was ashamed that I was a poor immigrant kid now in this school of, to me, it seemed like everybody was rich. And I had a nine-year-old plan that sounded good at the time, but now does not, and that was, if I just kept my mouth shut, these kids would never know what my life was like and maybe I could just fly under the radar. For anybody else who's ever tried to hide their identity, you know that that is not going to last for very long. Because I was so afraid, I put myself in this prison of shame that I carried with me all the time, fearful of who I really was. And lo and behold, that wasn't going to work. There was a day in my class where it was like, bring something special from your culture. It was like culture food day, and everybody was going to bring something, a plate or a dish or something.

And that's where I learned that Caucasians or white people, you guys got a lot of ethnic background, Irish and Danish and France and all these European places that have a lot of good food that I never knew anything about. I just knew Mexican food and American food,

and I didn't know the ties that it had to other people. I do now, but at nine years, I didn't. And I didn't have my plate. Everybody had their stuff, and during class we were there. My classroom had these huge windows that faced the parking lot. While we were in class, all my friends and everybody started whispering like, who's that? Who's that? Who's that? And lo and behold, I look over and out of this car, I don't even know whose car it is, because I don't know if we owned a car at the time, comes out my father, my father, who was a welder, who worked in a factory. He was in his overalls, his dingy overalls, black soot on his face, his hair looked like Albert Einstein, holding a plate of enchiladas. Oh my goodness. I could have died. All that fear, all that shame, everything that I was hiding was about to come to fruition.

Even nine-year-olds with a power of deduction knew that it wasn't Emmanuel, six foot Black dude's, father, because my father is shorter than I am. So there was only one other person left, and that was me. Everybody turned to me like, is that your dad? To my utter shame to this very day, I said no. I said he was my uncle, because that was the prison that I put myself in. People didn't reject me, I did that to myself. I was afraid what others would think of me. And today I want to talk about that, how fear, guilt, and shame, and what it does in our lives. And I bring it up, because that's what's in scripture. Hopefully, I can show to you that this baggage that we carry from our past, whatever it may be, whatever shame it may be. For me, it was being an immigrant and being brown, but for others, it may be a sexual addiction or a drug addiction or something they've done in the past or how tall they are, whatever it may be that we carry this baggage with us and it robs us of hope and it keeps us in prison.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, which is hope. And my goodness, we need hope. Can I at least get an amen for that?

Amen.

We need hope right now in this world. And for those of you who don't understand what Advent is, the literal translation of Advent is the arrival of a notable person, so somebody important is coming, and obviously in Christianity, that important person is Yeshua the Messiac, Emmanuel, the prince of peace, lion of Judea, Jesu, or in English, Jesus. That is who we're hoping for, and this advent sermon series that we're currently in, that we're starting, is called Fear Not, where we look at the "fear not" statements brought to the people in the narrative story of the birth of Yeshua, the birth of Jesus, in the continent of

Asia known as the Middle East, people who were met by angels or God and told them, "Fear not, for I bring you good news."

I have this heavy message of shame from scripture. As I read scripture, the author right off the bat starts to paint a picture of these two cats, Zachariah and Elizabeth. Oh, okay. Time out, senora. For my non-English-speaking friends, I call people who I don't know their name "biscuits." So if I don't know their name, they're biscuits, or maybe one day I'll know their name, they're biscuits. I also call people cats, not like a pet cat you pet, a feline cat. It's a slang term for person, cats. So if you hear me say "biscuits" and "cats," I'm talking about people. If you're having to translate to anybody, good luck to you, my friends. Good luck to you, my friends. Okay, time out, senora. Put me back in, coach.

Okay, so right up front, biscuits lets us know that Zachariah and Elizabeth are holy. How holy are they? Well, Luke 15 says a priest named Zachariah of the division of Abijah, so he's a priest working in the temple. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, Aaron, the brother of Moses, Aaron, where the priesthood line started, so she was a descendant from the priesthood. That is the equivalent of two pastors' kids getting married. That is holy. That's what biscuits is saying.

Then it goes on to say that they were blameless, not that they were sinless, but that they were blameless, meaning that they followed the Mosaic and Levitical law. If they ever did commit a sin, they did the proper things to do in order to be in right standing with God. They were the ideal religious couple. They did everything right. But then the author gives a troubling detail, that they were barren, had no children, and that they were old. Throw that on top of it. Not being able to have children in that time, in that culture was such a huge deal. In a patriarchal society, you required a son in order to pass on inheritance and the family name. Without children, the family bloodline would end. It was a huge deal at that time.

So there was this looming shame that Zachariah and Elizabeth carried with them all the time, and the author is making it very clear right up front that we understand this. Now, time out again, senora, for a second. This is a very sensitive topic of infertility and not being able to have kids, so I want to tread very lightly on this subject, because I know there's couples here who have faced this or are facing this now. And I know it can be deeply painful, because I've had friends who've gone through this. I want to be as respectful as I can talking

about it, and as much care as I can. But if for some reason I am offensive in any way, please let me know, so that the next time I can do better.

Okay, time back. Put me back in, coach. Okay. With these two major details, we can begin to imagine the kind of baggage each day that Zachariah and Elizabeth carry with them. I don't know this pain, but I can only imagine how much it was. Zachariah is in the temple. He goes and does his priestly duties, and an angel appears, and it freaks him out. He soils his robe for a bit, and he's super scared, and the angel's like, "Whoa, hold, hold, tone it down, bro." Luke 1:13, "Do not be afraid," these famous words, "fear not, Zachariah, your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son."

So now we know that Zachariah and Elizabeth have been praying about this, that this pain that they've been carrying with them, this shame they're carrying with them, they've brought it to God. They've prayed about it. The angel is pointing that out to us now, that they've prayed about it. And it seems that in this encounter, Zachariah for a second says, "Wait a minute, how can I know this, for I am old and my wife is old." And the angel says, "Yo, I'm Gabriel, bra. I stand in the presence of God. I'm the one telling you this. Come on, help a brother out." Man, an angel came to tell you you're about have a kid, you're like, "I don't know." Why? Because that's the prison that Zachariah was in, the shame and the prison that he was in that even when God showed up, he had a hard time believing. Are you sure? I'm old. My wife's old. Really? That is what fear, that is what shame can do to each one of us. Whatever our shame may be, that is the prison that we walk in.

Now, when I hear people who walk in fear, walk in shame, especially when it comes to any sort of racial things, just because I've been on the wrong end of plenty of racial problems, it troubles me, because I don't like seeing that. I'm the Director of Worship Communities here at BelPres, and I work with the non-English speaking groups and churches that we partner with here at BelPres. And our team, Pastor Alexis is on my team, we're always looking for how can we have our communities build relationships? How can we come together? How can we get to know each other more? And some of the lowest hanging fruit is like, well, there's the lobby. When we come in, we can say hello to each other.

I was talking to Pastor Ian, who's the pastor of the Seattle Chinese Covenant Church, who are predominantly Chinese immigrants, and I said, "Pastor Ian, can we work with your group, with your church to be able to welcome, say hello to people in the lobby?" And he

said, "Of course." He goes, "But I think Americans need to know something." I'm like, "What's that?" And he was like, "You know, there's a good number of my Chinese sisters and brothers who believe that Americans don't like them." And I was like, "Okay." My mind instantly, being an immigrant, being brown and all that kind of stuff, I instantly went to all the things that I would bring up of like, okay, I understand that you probably feel that way. But what he said actually surprised me. It was different than all the things that I had already preconceived. And he said, "The reason why they think that Americans don't like them is because the relations between US government and Chinese government are not good, and that reflects poorly on them. And they take on that shame of what their country, the one that they left, the one that some of them escaped from or whatever it may be, they feel that that reflects on them and Americans then won't like them, because they're just Chinese."

And I tried to disabuse Pastor Ian as best I could. I'm like, "Pastor Ian, of all the leadership here at BelPres, of all the people that I know here at BelPres, I have never heard that sentiment. I've never known anyone to ever say that. I don't think that's true. And if it is, it's got to be in the minority, and if we ever have to deal with that, we'll cross that bridge when we get there." But I have to tell you, and hopefully I spoke well about all of you, that I don't think that's the case. But they walk into the lobby with this fear, this baggage that they're carrying with them, that it stops them from even wanting to say hello to someone because afraid of the rejection. I know that fear.

That was Zachariah's response. How about Elizabeth? When Elizabeth found out all this stuff, we read on in Luke 1:25-26, "After this, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion, for the Lord has done this for me." I'm not a woman, if you haven't noticed, and so please tell me if I speak out of turn here, but having three kids, usually you wait the three months when you're pregnant, because things can happen. Then that's when you start talking about it, just because of nature. But this is five months, and this is not a natural birth. This was brought on by God. But you can see that Elizabeth has some hesitation herself and hides herself for five months. Even herself, you can see the fear that might be with her and the shame that she might be carrying.

But then she does acknowledge, the Lord has done this for me. She does acknowledge that God is doing something. She said, "In these days He has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people, taken away my shame among the people." It was only God who could take away the shame, and she acknowledges that. My message, if there's

anything you can hear, it is only God who can do these kinds of miracles. To be clear, in this situation, it was a miracle done by God who could remove this. They couldn't do anything about it, but it was God who could do it. So whatever shame that we're facing, whatever things that we're doing, whatever society is trying to put upon us, do not forget that it is God who we believe in and it is God who can do miracles and it is God who can change things in our lives. That is the hope of Advent.

For our Chinese sisters and brothers, we can do better. In the lobby, we can say hello, we can wave. And we're going to make mistakes. I told Pastor Ian, and I'm telling you guys right now, when two cultures come together, there's always that awkwardness of two cultures coming together, different values and different things, different customs. Whether it's ethnic groups or generational groups, there's always that. There will always be that little bit of awkwardness. That's to be expected. And we might make mistakes, and hopefully we can get over those and move on, but we can come together. I want to get to the app responses. It's getting late. Look out, and I'm I'm going over, but we see this troubled redemption that Elizabeth and Zachariah have to go through. They have shame. They take their shame to God. They face their shame. God shows up, and God does a miracle.

So what are some of the fears that y'all have? Let's see here. Let's see what we got here. Some of the fears that we got here today is, let's see, "that I will be too tired to really enjoy and be present with my family." Oh Lord, have mercy. Help a brother out. You are singing my song. Oh my goodness. You want to know how tired? I don't know about anybody else, but after I'm done preaching, I am done. I am so tired. And I fear this always, my family, my kids, that I'm doing so much and there's so much pressure that we have from whatever work that we're doing and whatever's going on. Get the tree and cut it down and feed the cat and you put up the lights and blah blah, and you're not even present, to be like, "Everybody enjoy Christmas now." Yeah, I hear you. I'm going to read over these. I'm going to pray over them for this week.

Okay. I'm going to try to do this in a minute. We'll see what happens. I'm sorry if I go over, guys. Just go to Jesus to pray. Pray to Jesus, because I just want to finish the story with my father. That day is the most traumatic day of my life. The second that the words left my mouth, that he is my uncle, my heart sank. My heart broke that day, because how could I be such a disrespectful little punk at nine years old? My father would wake up every weekday at 3:00 AM to get to his job that he would work for eight hours. And from there he would

come home, get a bite to eat, and go to a second job in order to be able to put food on the table, clothes on our backs and a roof over our heads. And even after that, didn't speak English, got himself into a GED, got himself into community college, and made something of himself to a better career. And here I was, this little punk who was ashamed of my father in front of everyone.

And it was that day, that never again, never again would I be ashamed of who I was, because it's very, very, very easy and clear that if you believe in Christ and you believe you are made by God, so God made you who you are. God made you brown. He made you white. He made you black. He made you born in whatever country you were born in. He gave you your parents. He gave you your family. You were made by God. No matter what society tells you, you are worthy of God's making. You are unique and loved. And never again did I ever hide the fact that I was an immigrant, that I came as an illegal immigrant. Now, I'm not illegal anymore, so please, no one call Homeland Security. I got papers, and actually, I don't have my green card with me right now, so don't call anybody. All I got is my vaccination card. I don't think that's going to get me back in the country. So let's just hold on to those phone calls for right now. Take my word for it, I have a green card. But even when it made people uncomfortable, I tell them like, "No, I came illegally to this country." And I feel the uncomfortability with my American friends. They're like, "Well, you were a child. It's not your fault. Your parents brought you illegally." I'm like, "Whatever it may be, that's my story. I can't change it. And I'm not ashamed of it. I had to deal with it." We do not need to live in a prison of shame.

May God bring you the hope. We are standing in a church that believes that Christ is Lord. As a leader in the church, if you give me that authority, as we collectively say, if Jesus is the answer, then whatever you are facing, whatever shame of the past you're doing, I've even heard now that there's white kids that are ashamed of being white because they're learning of the history of this country, but the color of your skin doesn't determine any of that stuff. That's just what our history does. My history's terrible too. Americans, we can look at what's going on at the border with Mexicans and how America treats immigrants from Mexico and from Latin America, and yes, there are some terrible things that happen.

Have you ever paid attention to what Mexico is doing to the South American immigrants at our Southern border? I got to deal with that too. That's shameful of the place where I'm from. But that doesn't necessarily say anything about me, or my skin color now automatically

needs to hold me down in that prison. That is not what God has for us. And whatever it is that we're facing, whatever guilt that we need to face or whatever things that we have, if Jesus is the answer, then let Jesus be the answer. Bring it to God. Get on your knees and let God show us the way.

Hallelujah.

Bow your heads with me. Father in heaven, I want to thank You so much for everything that You've given us, all the blessings that You've given us, Lord. I want to thank You for everyone who's here, Lord. I want to thank You for all the people that You've brought under this roof, under your roof, Lord, from all places, from all social classes and all tax brackets and all nationalities and all skin colors. Lord, we are here to praise You, God. Thank you so much for sending your son to die on a cross to forgive us of our sins, that your salvation is available to all who believe in your beautiful and your glorious name. And together, we all said, amen.

Amen.

Discussion Questions: Luke 1:5-6, 12-15, 18-19, 24-25

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Questions:

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions - *Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:*

- If Zachariah and Elizabeth were blameless, and observed all of God's commands and decrees? What are some of these commands and decrees? (Exodus 20, Leviticus 23:26-29)
- When Gabriel said their son Jon will go on with the spirit of Elijah? What do you think this signifies? (Malachi 4:5-6)
- Why do you believe Elizabeth hid herself for 5 months?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?
- Who might you share this with?

Closing Group Prayer:

- Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.
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