



In the days of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the priestly division of Abijah; his wife was from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both were righteous in the eyes of God, observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years. Once when he was serving as priest in his division's turn before God, according to the practice of the priestly service, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to burn incense. Then, when the whole assembly of the people was praying outside at the hour of the incense offering, the angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right of the altar of incense. Zechariah was troubled by what he saw, and fear came upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb, and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of fathers toward children and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to prepare a people fit for the Lord." Then Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel said to him in reply, "I am Gabriel, who stand before God. I was sent to speak to you and to announce to you this good news. But now you will be speechless and unable to talk until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at their proper time." Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and were amazed that he stayed so long in the sanctuary. But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He was gesturing to them but remained mute. Then, when his days of ministry were completed, he went home. After this time his wife Elizabeth conceived, and she went into seclusion for five months, saying, "So has the Lord done for me at a time when he has seen fit to take away my disgrace before others."

Introductory Prayer: Grant me the grace to make the most of this time of anticipation for your arrival at Christmas, Lord. My faith rests in you, my hope looks toward spending eternity with you. Help me grasp the value of time in the face of eternity.

Petition: Lord, help me to see the signs that you send into my life.

1. Seeing, yet Disbelieving: Zechariah had no excuse for doubting. There he was: in the sanctuary of the Lord, burning incense ? a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It was a privileged moment, a sacred space. Even an angel appears! If ever a man should have been prepared for a special message, it was Zechariah. Yet he doubts. He doesn't believe. He had followed "all the commandments," yet his fidelity didn't translate into a living faith at a crucial moment. Do we fall into the same trap? We say many prayers, but react with skepticism when God has a special request. Why is that? Are we trying to show love when we pray? Or are we just rattling on?

2. Excuses, Excuses: Zechariah thought his age would hinder God's plan. He underestimated God's power. Indeed, it is not God who is limited; rather, we are the ones who limit God, so to speak. Throughout the Bible, God called on unlikely people. Moses probably stuttered (cf. Exodus 4:10). Jeremiah was "too young" (Jeremiah 1:6). Peter was uneducated (Acts 4:13). Saul of Tarsus hated Christians (cf. Acts 9:1). All were unlikely prophets or apostles ? yet they let God use them. What's my excuse for saying no to God? Am I too busy? Too old? Too young? Too unworthy? Could God be calling me to do something that I think is beyond my capability?

3. Plowing Ahead: God goes ahead with his plan despite Zechariah's lack of faith. The Almighty was anxious to raise up a fitting herald (St. John the Baptist) for his Son. So he left Zechariah speechless for a time. We shouldn't be surprised if God plows ahead with his own plans in our lives, even when we resist him. He might do something unusual in our lives in order to keep his plans advancing. Could those setbacks really be God's hand at work? Might he be preparing us for something better?

Conversation with Christ: I like to think that I'm less stubborn than Zechariah, Lord. But sometimes it is hard to accept your will. I might even feel as if I have "missed the boat," and that you are no longer interested in me. Help me reject this kind of thinking and to have confidence in you.

Resolution: I will pray a Hail Mary for the ability to say "yes" to God's plans in my life.