

Zacharias: Overcoming Doubt

A sermon by the Rev. Mark D. Pendleton
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Christmas is a season of peace...and hope...and joy.

But this isn't always true. For some people, Christmas can actually be a challenging time of year. Their life may be in a state of confusion, conflict, or turmoil for any number of reasons, and the arrival of Christmas may only serve to remind them of things they *wish* they could experience in their hearts and lives, but which they realize they don't. And so for some people, Christmas can actually be a difficult time.

But let's not let this change the fact that Christmas is a happy and hopeful time—or at least it can be. Maybe even those of us who experience challenges at Christmastime will also experience brief moments or small pockets of time when the spirit of Christmas shines through:

- The sight of a little child all bundled up on a frosty Christmas eve in furry hat and coat with the tip of her nose colored Christmas red.
- The sound of a crackling fire on the hearth.
- The smell of apple cider heating up on the stove, or of gingerbread cookies being baked the way Grandma always used to bake them.
- A quiet moment listening to a favorite Christmas tune, or a candle-lit moment at home or in church, reading or hearing a favorite part of the Christmas story.

What is it about the Christmas season that makes it such a hopeful, magical time? There may be any number of answers to the question. But I believe that deep down inside a human heart, soul, and psyche, the most significant reason of all has to do with the birth of a little Child...in the land of Judah...in the little town of Bethlehem...on Christmas morn.

We know that three of the things a human soul longs for in an ongoing way are:

- A sense of the Lord's presence in our lives,
- A sense of His merciful care,
- And a sense of His Divine help and aid leading to good outcomes,

And these are three things that the Lord's birth into the world provided for humankind.

By being born on earth the Lord became literally, physically, visibly present with us; and each time we read of the little Child born on Christmas morn, our souls experience that actual, physical presence in a powerful and tangible way.

In addition, the Lord's birth on earth is a yearly testament to the fact that the Lord cares deeply about us. Why else would He have come on earth? And He is always there to help us.

And finally, the Lord's birth on earth, and His work of salvation that began at a young age, provides us with yearly sense of hope and promise for the miracles He can and even does work in our lives.

So Christmas is a magical, hopeful time for many reasons, and one of those reasons is that at this time of the year our souls experience the Lord's *presence, mercy,* and the work of His *salvation* in a special way, unlike any other time of the year.

Well, if these things are true, we may wonder why the Christmas story opens with one particularly stark contrast to the beauty and promise of Christmas. The story opens with Herod who was king of Judea at the time.

In contrast to Herod, we meet Zacharias the priest and his wife Elizabeth. Zacharias and Elizabeth were good people. It says they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But there was a problem, in that they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both of them were old. So when an angel of the Lord appeared to Zacharias and told him that his wife Elizabeth would bear him a son and that he would have joy and gladness, these were things that seemed impossible to Zacharias. Or perhaps the news that the angel brought seemed too good to be true.

Whatever the case, Zacharias asked the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is well advanced in years?"

We know that the story of the Lord's birth into the world is a metaphor for the birth of a charitable spirit or true love into human hearts. The story of *Zacharias* happens before the Lord's birth, and it's a story about the birth of John the Baptist. John was destined to be a front runner to the Lord later on in their lives, and his main message to the people would be a message of repentance or human change as a way of preparing for the coming Messiah.

In this story, Herod represents the more selfish or self-serving side of our personality; he represents any human weakness that we have that may show itself from time to time in human relationships.

Herod is contrasted in this story with Zacharias and Elizabeth, who picture the other half of our personality and character—the good, righteous and even blameless half. When the angel appears to Zacharias and forecasts John’s birth, this figuratively pictures any dawning sense of promise we have that human change is possible in our lives. It’s a promise that with help from the Lord’s Word, and the steps of change that He gives us, and from the Lord Himself, we will be able to meet and overcome even our greatest weaknesses so that true love can be born in our hearts.

Zacharias’ doubt pictures a kind of doubt that we can experience which says that human change and improvement are not possible for us. It’s a troubling sense of doubt which says that things can’t get better in our spiritual walk.

When we experience this kind of doubt, we’re told that what we may actually be experiencing is doubt about three different things in our lives:

- First, we may be doubting that the Lord is present with us.
- Second, we may be doubting that the Lord **cares** about us—that He will have mercy on us and help us in ways that He can .
- And third, we may be doubting that the Lord can free us from whatever difficulty or challenge may face us and help us move on to a better outcome for our lives.

To summarize, when we hit a time of serious doubt in our lives, we may be doubting the Lord’s *presence, mercy, and salvation.*¹

To experience the truth of this, think, for a moment, about one human weakness you’ve personally wrestled with that you haven’t been able fully to overcome in your life. Either that, or think of one particular blunder that you keep making over and over in your life which has seemed overwhelming to you, and that you sometimes think you won’t be able to surmount:

George has wanted for years to be kind and understanding toward his wife Clara, but his impatience and quick temper keep getting the better of him; and this Christmas their relationship is in a bad place. He seriously doubts that he can do better in this part of his life.

At moments like this in your own life, when you’re caught in a state of doubt for your future:

- Do you feel like the Lord is close by and present with you?
- Do you feel the Lord cares—that He’s caring for you even now, and that He is reaching out to help you in ways that can?
- And do you believe He will be able to help you turn this thing around in your life?

¹ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heavenly Secrets* 2338

Zacharias didn't believe these things. He said, "How can I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is well advanced in years." This is like us saying to ourselves, "It's too late. This has been happening too long. I'm set in my ways, and my mind is made up: I'm unable to change for the better."

In the New Church we know that this is a state of mind that evil spirits *love* to hold us in. They want to hold us in a place of negative doubt, so they inspire a strong spirit of negation. They make us think and believe that things can't improve or get better in our spiritual walk with the Lord.

But notice one other stark contrast in the story of Zacharias. When Zacharias says to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years," the angel answers right back, "I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings."

Notice how Gabriel doesn't cut Zacharias any slack in this part of the story. Zacharias says, "How shall I know this?" and Gabriel says, "I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God"...as if to say, "I hear you, Zacharias, and I stand *opposed* to your state of doubt."

Notice too that what's happening in the story involves a contrasting sense of certainty.² Zacharias is *sure* that the things the angel says can't take place, and the angel is just as certain in his conviction that they can. Whose certainty do you think is stronger? Whose certainty do you think would win in a contest?

We're told in the New Church that when we're in a time of spiritual conflict and we're experiencing a strong sense of negation welling up within us—a negation of the Lord's *presence*, *mercy*, and *salvation*, good spirits and angels from the Lord stand opposed to that negative spirit.³ Whether we're aware of it or not, they do everything they can to dispel a state of negative doubt, to inspire a brighter outlook, and to strengthen us in an affirmative spirit. When this happens, we are suspended between a spirit of negation and one of affirmation—a spirit that is able and willing to see good possibilities for our lives.

...And the choice is ours. Which spirit will we entertain? Will we continue down the road of pessimism and negation? Or will we allow a different perspective to filter into our minds from heaven?—

- In what way is the Lord present with us, even in a difficult and challenging time of our lives?
- Does the Lord care? In what way might He be caring for us even now, and extending Himself to us in ways that can help?

² Note Luke 1:4 and the word *certainty*.

³ *Heavenly Secrets* 2338

- And what is *one* positive outcome that is possible, if we take His life teachings to heart and accept His power for making clear choices in our lives?—

“I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God and who was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings.”

This is a call to action: Don’t let a spirit of pessimism and negation win the day, and don’t sink deeper into a negative spirit. Instead, open yourself to the reality of the Lord’s *presence, mercy, and salvation*—allow *the Lord* to open you to these realities.

Will this mean that we won’t experience times of doubt like Zacharias? Not at all. Doubt is part of being human. It’s part of the Lord’s Word. It’s part of the story of our lives. But it does mean we can make choices to overcome any state of doubt we may experience. We can allow ourselves to be uplifted and even cheered in a state of hope.⁴ And we can stand fast, like Gabriel, in an affirmative state of mind instead: “I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God....”

We know that the story of Zacharias moved in this very direction. It says that after those days, Elizabeth conceived. This pictures a shift in attitude on our part, as we get ready to move forward into some new life change that we long for. And still later in the story the child was born and both Elizabeth and Zacharias confidently affirmed, “His name is John.”

John is a symbol for the Lord’s Word in our lives, and specifically for the steps of change that the Lord gives us in His Word. So Elizabeth and Zacharias’ confident affirmation of John’s name represents our life-oriented response to the Lord’s Word and to His power for personal change and improvement.

So Christmas is a time of peace hope, and joy. It’s a magical and hopeful time. It’s not always a time that is free from doubt in our ability to move forward in our lives, but is a time when we can gather all the strength of the angels, and even the Lord Himself, to overcome states of negative doubt, and to confidently affirm the Lord’s *presence, mercy, and salvation* in our lives.

And the angel answered and said to Zacharias, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and who was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings.” Then Zacharias asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” Amen.

⁴ Ibid.

Readings: Exodus 19:1-4, Luke 1:5-25,57-66

The universal principle of faith on a person's part is that he or she should believe in the Lord; for by believing in Him there is union with Him and thereby salvation. To believe in the Lord is to have confidence that He saves; and as only those who live rightly can have this confidence, this, too, is meant by believing in Him. (*True Christian Religion* 2:3)

It is said in the Scriptures that two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and that Lot urged them exceedingly to turn aside into his house and to spend the night. Lot's urging them exceedingly means a state of temptation when a person overcomes. This does not become clear except to those who have experienced temptations. As has been stated, temptations involve feelings of doubt regarding the Lord's presence and mercy, and also regarding His salvation. The evil spirits who are present with a person at such times and who are the cause of temptation do all they can to infuse a negative outlook, but good spirits and angels from the Lord in every way disperse that doubting attitude, all the time preserving a feeling of hope and in the end strengthening an affirmative outlook. Consequently a person undergoing temptation hangs between a negative outlook and an affirmative outlook. Anyone who gives way in temptation remains in a doubting, and sinks into a negative, frame of mind, whereas one who overcomes still experiences feelings of doubt; yet he or she who allows himself to be filled with hope remains steadfastly in an affirmative outlook. Because a person seems during such conflict to urge the Lord, especially through prayers, to be at hand, to take pity, to bring help, and to free from condemnation, this is described at this point where the temptation of those who are becoming members of the Church is the subject. It is described by the angels first of all saying, "No," they would spend the night in the street, but by Lot urging them strongly, so that they turned aside to him and came into his house. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2338)

Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will come to pass, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you will receive, and you will have." (Mark 11:22-23)

With God all things are possible. (Matthew 19:26)

The Lord's Presence, Mercy, and Salvation

A Spiritual Task

When we're in a time of spiritual conflict, personal turmoil, or discouragement, there are three things that we tend to doubt about the Lord: His presence, mercy, and salvation. The next time you're in one of these states, have a private conversation with the Lord and ask Him the following (or similar) questions. Then listen for His responses in the quiet of your mind.

Regarding the Lord's *presence*: Are You with me?

Regarding the Lord's *mercy* (the Lord's mercy is His love grieving for us when we're in a difficult time, and reaching out to help us in ways that He can): Do You care? How are You helping?

Regarding the Lord's *salvation* (salvation has to do with good outcomes in our lives): What do You see as possibilities? What do You hope for?