

The First Part in the Series Family Life: "Two Families"

In the first year of their marriage, with his wife sick with a fever, her husband insists, "I'm taking you to the hospital for a complete checkup." In the second year of their marriage, when his wife gets sick again, her husband announces, "I've called the doctor and he's going to rush right over." In the third year her husband says, "I'll make you something to eat. Do we have any soup?" And in the fourth year of their marriage, when his wife is sick again, her husband says, "After you've fed the kids and washed the dishes, you'd better hit the sack."

Family life. It can be the best of times, and let's be honest, it can be the worst of times. On this, the first Wednesday in Advent, we begin a new sermon series called "Family Life." There is a lot to learn from the families connected with the birth of Jesus. They faced infertility, rejection, frustration, loss, and so much more.

Luke 1:5 introduces us to two of these families. "In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah." This evening's sermon has two parts. In the first part we'll take a look at Herod's. In the second part we'll zero in on Zechariah's family.

Herod's family. There were lots of men named Herod who ruled in Judea, but this was the one called "Herod the Great." This is the exact same Herod who, when Jesus was born, ordered the execution of all the boys under the age of two in and around Bethlehem. To say that Herod the Great was a monster, is to put things mildly. Born into a politically connected family in 73 BC, Herod was destined for a life of political hardball. He married ten times and ordered the execution of two of his wives and three of his sons. When Herod's father was poisoned by a political opponent, seething with revenge, he formed an ingenious plan. He invited his father's killers over for a dinner party. As they arrived he had them all murdered.

At the age of 69 Herod knew that he was dying and that no one would mourn his death. He longed for tears at his funeral, so he came up with one final, desperate plan. He would bring together the top leaders of the land for a meeting in Jericho and, once they arrived, he would have his fortress gates locked. Just before the moment of his death, he would have all the leaders massacred. One way or another, people would cry when Herod died.

In the late 1800s two paddleboats on the Mississippi River left Memphis, Tennessee on a race to New Orleans. As his boat fell behind, an enterprising sailor took some of the ship's cargo and began throwing it into the ovens.

When other sailors saw that the supplies burned just like coal, they threw more and more of it in. That boat ended up winning the race, but in the process that boat burned all its cargo.

That's a tragic picture of Herod's family. To win the race, eliminate every rival, and to be top dog Herod burned all the cargo. Herod destroyed his family.

I can almost hear each of us say, "Thank goodness I'm not like Herod! I would never even raise a hand in anger against a child. I pay my taxes and every now and then I slip a little money into the offering plate. Once at a nursing home I even played bingo with my grandmother."

But, if we're honest with ourselves, we sometimes see in the mirror a little Herod staring back at us. There's a part of us all that would rather rule than serve, dominate rather than submit, and get ahead and win even at the expense of people in our family.

We've all used words to get back at our spouses, to disrespect our parents or made selfish decisions that have hurt our children and ignored clear warnings from God's Word. And the result? Though family can be the best of times, too often family is the worst of times. So much for highlighting Herod's family. Let's now zero-in on Zechariah.

Zechariah's family. "They had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years" (Lk 1:7). In Luke 1:25 Elizabeth describes her barrenness as "a reproach (disgrace) among the people." In those days, if you had children you had everything. Conversely, if you had no children you had nothing. Zechariah and Elizabeth longed for a child. But now it's too late. They're both too old. That ship sailed and that train left the station. There was no going back. They were both well along in years. The pain of regret hits us most frequently when it comes to family.

Maybe you're like Zechariah and Elizabeth, wanting children but not able to conceive. Or maybe you're single, desperately wanting to be married, but it just hasn't happened. Maybe you're married, but it hasn't turned out like you had hoped. Like Zechariah and Elizabeth we can all feel disgrace and shame among the people. Is that the end of the story? No way! God intervened! He gave Elizabeth and Zechariah gifts—the same gifts He gives to our families. What are they?

The first gift God gives to Zechariah and Elizabeth and to us is that **God's promises never end.** Israel's three matriarchs Sarah (Gn 11:30), Rebekah (Gn 25:31), and Rachel (Gn 29:31) were all barren at one time. And so was Hannah, the mother of Samuel (1 Sm 2:5). All four women eventually had children.

Elizabeth and Zechariah must have believed if God could do it before—not once, but four times—God can do it again!

Has family life left you frustrated and empty? Then hear this. If God was faithful to Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah, He will be faithful to you. God loves you. His promises for you in Jesus Christ never, ever end! You may have given up on you. But God will never give up on you. He replaces barrenness and brokenness with goodness and grace!

A second gift God gives to us is that **His presence never disappoints**. “[Zechariah] was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into **the temple** of the Lord and burn incense” (Lk 1:9). Luke 23:45 records another time that someone has access to the temple; “The curtain of **the temple** was torn in two.” In Luke 1, Zechariah has access to God’s presence. In Luke 23, because of Christ’s death, we all have access to God’s presence. And this presence never disappoints!

God’s presence is seen most clearly here for us in the Lord’s Supper. The body that suffered and was crucified—that true body is present for you. The blood that was shed, spilled, and splattered—that true blood is present for you. By the blood of Jesus you have access to the most holy presence of the most Holy God! And this real presence forgives all your family failures—every last one of them!

A third gift is that **God’s plan never fails**. God gave Elizabeth and Zechariah a child. And God’s promise is that this child, John the Baptist, “will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children” (Lk 1:17). God’s plan is to turn our hearts towards home, to replace vengeance and bitterness with forgiveness and love. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of the children towards their parents!

One day a mother came home from the grocery store. She looked in her living room and saw her four children sitting in a circle. As she got closer, the mother saw that her children were playing with four of the cutest little skunks you’ve ever seen! The mother yelled, “Run, children, run!” So each child grabbed a skunk and began to run. After that? Let’s just say that things began to get real stinky!

Family life. It can be the best of times. It can be the worst of times. The next time it gets real stinky in your family, don’t fly off the handle like Herod—you could lose it all. Instead, trust in God’s promises, God’s presence, and God’s plan. They are real. They are alive. And they work. Just ask Zechariah and Elizabeth! Amen.