

I love a good story, don't you? I love to listen to stories and I love to tell them. Whenever old friends or family connect, inevitably someone will say something like, "*Do you remember the time when we...*" Every time a story is retold, a memory is relived. Reliving some memories produce joy and love, while others produce longing and sadness—these stories reconnect us to our history, reminding us where we've been and who we are.

Some stories are frequently retold because they are so precious—we retell them because we want to relive them. In my house, one of the stories we tell over and over again is the story of Anna's adoption. Every so often Anna will ask, "*Dad, can tell me the story of how I became your daughter?*" Every time Anna asks, I launch into a story that I never get tired of telling, and she never gets tired of hearing.

When Luke was born to us, Naomi and I were filled with such joy. We loved being parents and longed to have another child but infertility made it impossible. Over time, God began to speak to us about international adoption, and we entered a process that would eventually lead us to a little girl in Thailand.

After 15 months of adoption seminars, paperwork, and home studies, Naomi and I were approved to adopt, and one night, while home alone, I received a call from our adoption agency—we had been matched with a child. Glenda—our adoption worker—called me and asked if I wanted to know whether we had been matched with a girl or a boy.

I can honestly tell you that I have never wanted to know something so badly in my entire life; I had been secretly praying that God would bless us with a little a girl—Anna loves this part of the story.

As soon as I heard Glenda's voice on the phone, I knew I had a problem on my hands. Months before, Naomi and I had made a pact—if one of us got the phone call and the other wasn't present, we would wait for the other before we found out any details. When I explained to Glenda, she promised to email a copy of our child's file—a brief history, name, pictures, etc. I hung up the phone and sure enough, there was an email waiting in my inbox. And for the next few hours, that unopened email was burning a hole in my heart.

As soon as Naomi got home, we sat down in front of our computer, opened the email, and saw pictures of Anna—Naomi began to cry and I began to laugh. Each time I tell the story, Anna stops me at this point and asks, "*Dad, why did you laugh?*" And I will explain that my heart was so happy, when I saw the pictures, I couldn't contain my joy—I had to laugh! And then Anna will ask, "*Dad, why did mom cry?*" And I will explain that mom's heart was so happy, when she saw the pictures, she couldn't contain her joy—she had to cry!

Every time a story is retold, a memory is relived. Reliving these memories reconnect us to our history, reminding us where we've been and who we are.

Long before he was known as John the Baptist, he was just John—born to an elderly, pious, Jewish couple. Their pregnancy and John's birth was accompanied by signs and miracles, and I have to believe that little John—just like my Anna—would frequently ask, "*Mom, Dad, can tell me the story of how I became your son?*"

In the same way, long before Jesus was ever called "the Christ," He was just Jesus. Jesus would have grown up on stories of Mary's

miraculous conception, the angel choir that sang at His birth, and wise men bowing down in worship.

These two cousins, John and Jesus, grew up with these stories and were shaped by them. From a young age they knew they had been set apart by God to serve His purposes. These important stories are not just for them, but for us as well—these stories hold the power to shape our lives too. Their stories highlight one of the unique aspects of Christianity. Most religions show people how they must make their way to god; Christianity has a unique message about how God took the initiative to move towards us.

This morning I'm going to tell you Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John's story—it can be found in Luke 1:5-25, 39-45, and 57-80. But instead of reading the story, I'm going to tell it to you in the first person. I'm going to stick close to the biblical text, but I've written my sermon as a bed time story, told by Zechariah and Elizabeth to their 9-year-old son, John. I imagine that John was a lot like my Anna—a bright, inquisitive child who loved to hear how his story first began.

*“Mom, Dad, before I go to bed, can you tell me the story of how I became your son?”* “What part of the story do you want to hear John?” *“I want to hear all of it! Start at the beginning but don't leave anything out—I'll know if you try to skip part of the story!”*

Zechariah and Elizabeth looked at one another and smiled, John was a gift from God, given to them in their old age; he brought such joy and delight.

“Well John,” Zechariah began, “your mother and I had always wanted a child, but God had not answered our prayer. Month after

month, year after year, our longing grew but so did our despair—one day we woke up and realized we were old, long past the years of bearing a child. That was a very hard day, filled with many tears.”

“As you know John, all those years I was a priest—most of the time I served here in our little town, teaching the people the Scriptures, helping to solve disputes, but as is the custom, twice a year, one week at a time, I would travel to Jerusalem to serve in the Temple. One day, while serving in the Temple, I was chosen to burn incense at the altar; I can remember being excited, being chosen was a great honour.”

“But when I approached the altar I looked up saw an angel. John, have you ever seen an angel before? Wide-eyed, John shook his head “no”.

“Me neither—it was the first time. John never forget, even though we don't see God, He is all around us. We get busy eating, working, resting, and playing but we tend to forget that God is near. We pray as though God is far away, but John, He is right beside us, and sometimes angels are watching too.”

“The angel (Gabriel) told me not to be afraid but I had never been so afraid in my life. But that's when I received some unbelievable news—Gabriel said that your mother and I were going to have son, and that we were to name him John.” Zechariah paused for a moment and John interjected, *“Dad, what else did the angel say about me?”* “He said that you would be special John, set apart to the Lord from birth; he said that you would be filled with the Holy Spirit. And do you know what that means? To be filled with the Holy Spirit? It means that God Himself lives inside you.”

*“But Dad, why would God want to live inside me? He has the Temple to live in.”* “John, the Temple is an important building, but God’s desire has always been to dwell among His people. He lives in you because you are special to Him; He likes to be close to you, and the Holy Spirit will help you to walk closely with God.”

John thought for a moment and then asked, *“Dad, does the Holy Spirit live inside everyone?”* Zechariah replied, “John, the prophets tell us that one day God will pour out His Spirit on all people— young people like you and old people like me, men and women alike. God’s desire is to be close to His people; He wants to love them and strengthen them from the inside out. The Holy Spirit lives in you John; He loves you and will give you strength to follow wherever God leads you.

*“Dad, what else did the angel say?”* “The angel said that God will use you to bring back people who have turned away from God—you will help to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

“But do you want to hear something funny John? I had this enormous, scary angel, right in front of me, telling me that I would have a son—you’d think that would be enough to convince me, but it wasn’t. I wanted to believe but my faith and doubt were all mixed up together. Your mother and I had given up on praying for a child— Gabriel’s news was too good to be true. I was too afraid to trust. It takes courage, John, to take God at His word; our fears often lead us to unbelief.”

“Do you know what I did? Because I didn’t believe Gabriel, I asked him to give me some proof. Gabriel said that because of my unbelief

I wouldn’t be able to talk until after you were born. After Gabriel disappeared I went outside—everyone was waiting for me. I opened my mouth to tell everyone what I had seen, but no words came out. I finished up my week of service at the Temple and then went home to your mother, and it wasn’t long before your mom became pregnant, just like God had promised.”

Turning to Elizabeth, John asked, *“Mom, what was it like being pregnant?”* “John, it was wonderful and weird all at the same time.” *“Weird? What do you mean?”* “John, for the first time in my life, it was like someone else was controlling my body. My tummy started to grow, I was hungry all the time, tired all the time, and going to the bathroom all the time. Sometimes you would kick my bladder like it was a soccer ball. But I didn’t mind John; all those years of praying, hoping, and waiting made pregnancy wonderful. In fact, the first five months I rarely left the house.”

John exclaimed, *“Five whole months! What did you do? Weren’t you bored? Didn’t you feel alone?”* “John, I was never alone. Your father was often with me, but even when he was away, the Lord was with me, and so were you. We hadn’t met yet but every day I would sit with my hands on my tummy and talk to you; I was so thankful— everyday I thanked God for you. You are a precious gift John and even your name tells a part of the story; your name means ‘God has been gracious.’”

*“Mom, I sure like our family’s story...it’s just like Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac from the Bible.”* “It is indeed my son. God is living, He is still active today; God is still doing for people what we read about in the Scripture. He still heals. He still rescues. And He still blesses old women with unexpected children.”

*“Mom, can you tell me about the time when Aunt Mary came to visit? You know, the time when I was in your tummy and Jesus was in her tummy?”* “John, that’s one of my all time favourite stories. Word had gotten out that I was going to have a baby, and Aunt Mary came to visit. I was much too old to have a baby, Aunt Mary was much too young to have a baby, but there we were, both of us with unexpected pregnancies. You were in my tummy and Jesus was in Aunt Mary’s tummy and the moment Aunt Mary came into the room, you leapt within me and started to dance.”

John asked, *“Why did I start dancing mom?”* Elizabeth smiled and said, “I don’t know for sure John, but I think the Holy Spirit played such a happy tune, you couldn’t help but dance. You were celebrating John, and as the Holy Spirit filled me and your Aunt Mary, we joined in the celebration. John, do you remember the words the Holy Spirit put in my mouth?”

*“I think so,”* John replied, *“you said to Aunt Mary, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?’”*<sup>1</sup> “Very good John, you remembered the words, but can you tell me what they mean?” John was quiet for some time. *“I’m not sure mom, but I think they mean that Jesus is very special—that God sent Jesus to do something very special for all of us.”*

“That’s right John. And right after the Holy Spirit put those words in my mouth, He put a song in your Aunt Mary’s heart and she began to sing. The next time she comes to visit I’ll have her teach it to you. But there we were John—your Aunt Mary and I, you two boys, and the Holy Spirit—you were dancing to the Spirit’s song before Aunt Mary even began to sing. I think we all knew that God was doing something special, something He had promised to do for Israel and the whole world.”

*“Mom, does God always keep His promises?”* “John, you know what the Scriptures say: **‘God is not human, that he should lie...Does He speak and then not act? Does He promise and not fulfill?’**<sup>2</sup> God always keeps His promises, though not always when we want, or, in the way we expect. And God will keep His promises to you John, you can trust Him to be faithful.”

“I think that’s enough of the story for tonight John, it’s getting late John, it’s time for bed.” John immediately protested, *“But Mom, the story isn’t done...I haven’t even been born and Dad hasn’t got his voice back; we can’t end the story like that!”* Zechariah gently grabbed Elizabeth’s hand, “He’s got a good point dear...I’ll tell the rest of the story and then it’s straight to bed for all of us.”

“While your mom was pregnant, I had a lot of time to think. There were so many things I wanted to say to her but couldn’t. There were so many words I wanted to pray to God. I wanted to tell Him I was

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:42-43.

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 23:19.

sorry for doubting His goodness. I was reminded of King Solomon’s words from Ecclesiastes, *“Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.”*<sup>3</sup>

“When my voice was taken I began to notice how loud and noisy our world is. Because I couldn’t say anything, I spent a lot of time listening and observing.”

“I began to appreciate the beauty all around me—take your mother for instance; I have never seen her so beautiful as when she was pregnant. I observed many other beautiful things, but the beauty only magnified how broken things are in our world. In a new way I saw how people suffered, I felt the despair of people around me. And something began to rise up in me, a hope about the way things will be one day, a hope in God’s promise to restore all things.”

“8 days after you were born, I still couldn’t speak. On the day you were circumcised, we had a big family party; your aunts, uncles, and cousins came over to celebrate with us. Everyone began to pester your Mom—you can’t call him John, there’s no one in our family named John. Why not name him after his father? Zechariah Jr. has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

“You know how your Mom is—she wouldn’t budge, and so they began to pester me. I grabbed a writing tablet and wrote, ‘His name is John,’ and immediately my mouth was opened and I began to

praise God. The Holy Spirit filled me and I began to sing a song I had never heard before, a song of hope, a song about God’s deliverance, a song about you, and your cousin Jesus.”

*“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

*And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”*<sup>4</sup>

John asked, “Dad, what does the song mean?” Zechariah replied, “John, don’t you see? It’s a song of good news—we don’t have to work our way to God, He is coming to us! There is a freedom that God will bring; He will rescue us from the mess this world is in. Can you imagine what it would be like to be free John? Free from our enemies? One day nothing will stand between us and God, not our enemies, not even our disobedience.”

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<sup>3</sup> Ecclesiastes 5:2.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:68-79.

The prophet Isaiah once said, *“The people walking in darkness have seen a great **light**; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned...I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them.”*<sup>5</sup>

“John, you will go before the Lord to prepare the way for His coming. God will speak to you, the Holy Spirit will put words in your heart and on your tongue. You’re going to speak about God’s salvation, His forgiveness of sin and rebellion, and people will respond by stepping out of darkness and into God’s wonderful light.”

After Zechariah had finished saying these words, all was still. John crawled into bed, Elizabeth tucked him in, just the way he liked, and in matter of moments he was fast asleep.

As the parents slipped away, Elizabeth turned to Zechariah and said, “Those two boys are going to change the world. Our son, the prophet, and our nephew, the Saviour, Christ the Lord. Can you believe it Zechariah?” “Just barely,” he replied, “just barely.”

**Conclusion:** Too often we read the biblical story without any imagination; when we read without imagination we end up with two-dimensional characters that don’t resemble our lives in any way. I suspect that John grew up on these stories. I suspect that he lived

with this story so long that one day he awoke to find that the story was living in him.

John went on to be known as “the Baptist;” *“He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”*<sup>6</sup> and crowds flocked to him. He did exactly as the Holy Spirit had promised; his preaching prepared the way for Jesus’ message and mission.

God always keeps His promises, though not always when we want, or, in the way we expect. And just as God kept His promises to Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John, we can trust Him to be faithful.

### **The Lord’s Supper**

The message of Christmas is that we don’t have to work our way to God, He has come to us. Jesus wasn’t born with a silver spoon in His mouth—His first cradle was a feeding trough; from the very beginning He was well prepared to meet us where we are, in the muck and mire of life. And if He meets us here—at our worst—and loves us here—at our worst—we can be certain that His love for us has nothing to do with our performance.

But that’s the thing, isn’t it? Many of us aren’t certain. Many spend a lifetime chasing the approval of others and never feeling like they measure up.

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 9:2; 42:16.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 3:3.

Nathan Foster writes, “In the deep recesses of their heart, they can’t seem to outrun the gnawing ache that they aren’t good enough. When honest, they admit the lie that drives so much of their life: God is disappointed with their performance, just like everyone else is, just like their parents, teachers, spouse, and bosses were and are.”<sup>7</sup>

When we look in the mirror, all too often, what we see is the person we don’t want to be. What we need is a reminder of who we really are. The Lord’s Supper is just such a reminder.

This table isn’t for the self-righteousness or the already-made-perfect; it’s for you and me. It’s a meal to remind us that because we can’t work your way to God, He has come to us. This meal reminds us that God sees us at our worst, and still calls us “Daughter!” “Son!”. You are loved, you are loved, you are loved. That’s why Jesus came—that’s why Jesus is present among us this morning.

On the night before He died on the cross, “*Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’*”<sup>8</sup>

Will you receive the forgiveness and love of God today? It is for you, bought with Christ’s broken body and shed blood.

At this time I’d like to invite our worship team to come, as well as those people who been asked to serve the Lord’s Supper this morning. When the worship team begins to play, let me encourage you to make your way forward; you can tear off a piece of bread—symbolizing Christ’s broken body—and dip it in the cup—symbolizing Christ’s shed blood—and then eat with a glad heart.

## **Worship**

## **Benediction**

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<sup>7</sup> Nathan Foster, *The Making Of An Ordinary Saint*, 59.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 26:26-28.