

I went looking for 18,000 people. I found a few more than 18,000 in Boston, where a deejay offered ... as one of those on-air give-aways ... six hairs from Elvis Presley's sideburns. In one week, there were more than 18,000 people competing for that prize.

I found 18,000 people with great smiles. Last year, Yomarie Tejada was declared Miss People's Choice 2008 in a contest sponsored by Crest toothpaste and Scope mouthwash. It's called the "Smile Bright in the Spotlight" contest. Yomarie beat out 18,000 other smiles for the win. (How did 18,000 people even know about that contest?)

I found 18,000 sexy geeks. The first-ever Sexiest Geek Alive contest had 18,000 entries. So ... if you thought maybe you were the only sexy geek in the world, you've got 18,000 other geeks ready to prove you wrong about that.

I found 18,000 talents in Minneapolis. That's where Denise Jackson was when she was chosen from over 18,000 contestants who auditioned for American Idol. In Minneapolis. 18,000 contestants in Minneapolis alone. Wow.

I found 18,000 desperate Indians. In Mumbai, India, more than 18,000 contestants competed in the Zoom Speed-Dating Contest Finals for the coveted title of India's Speed Dating Hunk and Speed Dating Siren. I don't know who won, but somewhere there's a guy who can now put "Speed Dating Hunk" on his resume.

And I found 18,000 people in the first chapter of the book of Luke. Also in a contest ... sort of. They were all in the mix for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to go into the inner court of the temple to offer the prayers of the people. The winner was a guy named Zechariah. You find his

story in Luke, chapter one, beginning with verse 5. Turn with me, if you have your Bibles. (And while you're turning, I want to challenge all of you to bring your Bibles with you to church this month. We'll be in the first two chapters of Luke for three weeks, and I think it would make a difference to you to be able to see the story on the page. So if you have a Bible, bring it. And if you need a Bible, we have plenty ... just ask as you leave today and we'll be glad to give you one).

Luke 1:5-6 says -- *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. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.* Zechariah was one of about 18,000 priests in the nation at the time. And this couple ... both of them ... were from the line of Aaron, which is the priestly line. To have two people in the same household, both from that lineage, was something like spiritual royalty. It set them apart. And the story says they were both righteous, too, and that also set them apart. You and I both know there is a difference between a priest and a righteous priest. Elizabeth and Zechariah took their call to the priesthood seriously. They quietly, faithfully followed God out of pure and obedient hearts. And actually, that's the first principle I find in this story ... that **God uses good hearts**. God uses faithful people.

There's something else in here, too, that gets our attention ... because it reminds us of just *how* intimately involved with faithful hearts God can be. It's in their names. Zechariah means "Jehovah (God) remembers." Elizabeth means "Oath of God." So when Zechariah married Elizabeth, they became "Jehovah remembers His oath," or, "God remembers His promises." So this couple was sort of a walking prophecy for Israel.

Because Israel was desperately watching and waiting for God's promised Messiah, but for over four-hundred years (up to the time of Zechariah and Elizabeth) God had been really quiet. Not one prophetic word in over four-hundred years. After a while, that begins to feel like rejection. Like they'd been forgotten. Like maybe God had changed his mind on them ... like maybe he'd gone back on his promise. But here in this couple, God makes a statement. He announces that he has not forgotten. He has not rejected his people. God keeps his promises.

That's an eternal word, and maybe one you need to hear this morning if you *feel* like God has forgotten you, or rejected you, or changed his mind about you. Go back to Jeremiah 29:11. This is a word from God spoken to the people of Israel after they'd been sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. That would be like somebody evicting you from your house and sending you to ... I don't know ... New Jersey. God tells them to make the best of it, because even though it might not be the best situation, God will be with them and eventually he'll get them back to Jerusalem. He won't forget them. And he tells them, "I know the plans I have for you ... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

That was God's word for the Israelites, but I believe that's an eternal word. Which means it's a word for us, too. Because God does work from a plan. He didn't just create you and then wonder what you're good for. *If there was no plan for your life, you would not exist.* So here's the promise: from the moment he dreamed you, God has had plans for you ... plans to give you a hope and a future. And nothing can separate us from that. Romans 8 tells us God is for us, and nothing else in all creation is able to separate us from the love of God that dreamed us up and placed into a purpose.

And you may be saying, "Well, that's all well and good, but that doesn't mean I know what my purpose is. Or how to get there." Fair enough ... but there is also a promise that God doesn't

leave us to figure it out alone. In John, chapter 17, Jesus is praying. And he prays for the ones who were with him when he walked the earth, but then he says (listen to this), “I don’t want to pray only for them. I pray also for all those who will believe in me through this message.” And Jesus goes on to say that what he’s praying for ... is that anyone who believes will be brought to completeness. And to me, that’s sort of an astonishing thought ... that Jesus is praying for anyone who believes in him. He’s praying that we will be in perfect union with God and his plan. Romans 8 says basically the same thing ... that the Holy Spirit prays for us, even when we don’t know how to pray for ourselves. So take all this together ... what Jeremiah, John and Paul have all said ... and it adds up to this one, amazing promise. That God ... with all that He has (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is *for* us. He created us with a *good* purpose in mind, he has a plan for us and he has not forgotten that plan or given up on us. Even if we’ve gotten way off track, He’s still praying His best over us.

When we have faith, that’s the result. He works his plan in us. It may not be the plan we expect, but because God is for us, we can trust the plan. This is what Elizabeth and Zechariah discovered. You see, up to this place where we meet them in Luke, they’ve been unable to have children. They are in their sixties and childless. It looks for all the world like God has forgotten them. But he hasn’t.

Look at Luke 1:8-9 - *Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.* Remember, there were about 18,000 priests serving the temple in Jerusalem. The chances of getting chosen to go into the Holy Place to burn incense on the altar were pretty slim. But on this day, Zechariah was chosen. And while he was in there (Luke 1:11-12) - ... *an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.* It was an

unnerving thing to go into the Holy Place. You only did it once. Just to make it even more intimidating, when a priest went into the Holy Place to do this incense thing, they tied a cord to his leg so that if he died while he was in there, they could pull him out. So you know ... the whole experience was pretty intimidating. But still ... it strikes me as sort of ironic that Zechariah gets spooked by an angel ... while he's in the Holy Place. As if he was surprised to find something spiritual in there. It makes me ask myself: how often do I come into *this* place without any expectation that something spiritual might happen? Do you come here expecting God to show up? Imagine what would happen if we all came with that expectation ...

Luke 1:13-18 says - ... *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 give him the name John. (remember this, that John means "God is gracious") 14He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15for he will be great in the sight of the Lord ... (He will) make ready a people prepared for the Lord." 18Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."* Which is *not* the right answer. He's either saying, "Forget it. It's too late. I'm not interested in having a baby at sixty years old." Or he's saying, "I don't believe God is powerful enough to do this." Maybe there was even some bitterness in his response ... maybe he felt like God had given up on him. We know Zechariah wasn't just honestly trying to understand because of the way the angel responded. Evidently, for Gabriel, this was like giving someone a gift and having them hand it back. As we said, that's not the right response. When God gives you a gift, you're supposed to take it.

The angel was a little miffed (Luke 1:19-20) - *19The angel answered, "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. 20And*

now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time." How does Gabriel know? Because God keeps his promises.

When Claire Marie was a little girl, we used to call that place where she went to get punished the Thinking Chair. That's where she went to think about what she did. Which never really sat well with Steve, because he didn't like the idea of making thinking into a punishment. But by striking him unable to speak, Gabriel has just given Zechariah the equivalent of about nine months in the Thinking Chair ... to think about the nature of God. God is His wisdom and goodness wants Zechariah ... the father of John the Baptist ... the one who will announce Jesus' coming ... to know that he knows that God is good. That God is for us. And that God keeps his promises. God wants not just this man's obedience. He wants his heart.

Same chapter, a few verses later ... the angel Gabriel visits a young woman named Mary. He tells her also that she's going to have a baby. And she responds a lot like Zechariah. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The difference is that she's a fourteen-year-old girl, not a sixty-year-old priest. She really *doesn't* know how it happens with angels. So Gabriel explains (Luke 1:36-37) - ³⁶*Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month.* ³⁷*For nothing is impossible with God."* And Mary takes that truth at face value and runs with it. She says, "Well then, let it happen like God wants it to happen."

I wonder what choice in your life needs that kind of response? Instead of arguing, where do you need to trust God? John Piper says, "It is possible to demand too much evidence before you believe God's promises." He's not talking about being foolish. He's talking about the

reasonable expectation that an all-powerful God can and will do the humanly impossible. Do you believe that **with God, nothing is impossible**? Do you trust Him?

Elizabeth got it. Luke 1:23-25 says – *When (Zechariah's) time of service was completed, he returned home. 24After 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."* This is a powerful principle for us. Their whole story happens like it happens so Elizabeth can get *this* point ... that **God heals dis-grace**. Do you remember what John's name means? John means "God is gracious." God gives grace that heals in us all those moments we lived without grace ... outside the purposes of God. God heals in us all those moments we lived in shame ... unable to feel the grace ... the love ... the care and provision of God. Everything that happened to Elizabeth and Zechariah happened so they could bring into the world this great news ... **God heals dis-grace**.

I love the way Chonda Pierce teaches the creation story. She talks about how, in the story of Adam and Eve, before they sinned or ever talked to that serpent ... the Bible says they were naked and unashamed. There was no sense of judgment or condemnation. No fear of rejection. No shame. Then ... the temptation of Satan to be something they were not ... and then that terrible fall from grace. And that's when a human first saw himself ... herself ... as somehow not good enough. That's why they put clothes on ... just trying to hide behind something. It must have broken the Father's heart to see his beautiful children experience such shame. Dis-grace.

God came looking for them and since they were covered, he asked, "Where are you?" And they answered, "We were afraid because we were naked, and so we hid ourselves." And God said

(and you can just hear the grief in the question), “Who told you that you were naked? Who told you that you had something to be ashamed of? Who spoke that word into your life? Because that word is a lie.”

And that word is the very word our Jesus has come to heal. He came to heal that word of dis-grace ... that lie that someone along the way has spoken into our lives ... to make us feel ashamed. The lie that because you are childless you are second-class or because you are broke, you're worthless. God came to heal that. Zechariah had the humbling privilege of sitting in silence for nine months with that truth. And the word that opened his mouth and gave him back his voice was the name of his son. When his child was born and Zechariah directed them to name him John ... God is full of grace ... he got his voice back.

And that word ... grace ... will give you your voice, too. Grace is the idea that it's God's work, not ours. God has a purpose for your life. God wants to use your good heart. God wants to heal your dis-grace.