

## ***Waiting for God***

### **Good morning church.**

As was mentioned earlier, today marks the **second Sunday** in the liturgical season of **Advent**. If you missed last Sunday's teaching, can I encourage you to find some time and go online this week to hear how we introduced Advent.

Because, as we said last Sunday at length: ***we NEED Advent***. We, who follow and trust Christ today, need to be pulled out of our **personal** and **collective amnesia** – to once again see our world and our lives within ***the Great Horizons*** of God's Saving Action in the past and God's Saving Action in the future. These horizons that help us understand where we are in the Story of the world – in the Story of God – and give us hope to live and walk by faith in the present...

***We need Advent*** – to tether us again and again to the Promise of God...

And not only that, but we need Advent because it reminds and orients us in our **waiting – for God**.

Which doesn't sound exciting, but is an integral part of not just **Advent**, but of ***the Christian life itself***.

As many have said, **to be a Christian is *to live in wait***.

To live in the present with faith and longing ***for what is to come*** – even to the point of ***groaning***.

**The Apostle Paul, in Romans 8:22-25, says...**

*"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."*

Let me read also from Paul's words to the **Philippians (3:19-21)**... Referring to those who oppose Christ, Paul writes...

*"Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."*

Among other things, both of these passages alert us to the reality – that the Christian life – this side of the grave – is one marked **by waiting.**

*Those whose hope is in Christ, do not expect to be fully satisfied in this life. We do not expect all our wounds to be healed in this life. We do not expect all our longings to be fulfilled... all of our vulnerabilities and struggles to be resolved...*

**Not until Jesus reigns over all... Not until Jesus comes again** – to bring His kingdom, reign and shalom over all. **Then** will he *"transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."*

And not just our bodies – but all of creation.

**To be a Christian is to live in wait.**

And **this waiting** – for God – rather than being just some behind the scenes longing, actually **shapes our lives profoundly** – leading and empowering us to not settle for lesser solutions, partial remedies, quick fixes, immediate gratification that ultimately does not satisfy.

No, to be a Christian is **to live in wait**. To live **unresolved** – with **confident hope** that in Christ all will one day be made right and made whole...

**Which is not easy.**

Truth is, this is something that our world and flesh work against at every turn – inviting and exhorting us *to live our best life now... to expect it... to fight for it... to demand it... to satisfy our every craving and longing... to **carpe our diem** – to seize the day – because it's all we've got... Anything less – and life is considered an **injustice**...*

That's what our world and our own hearts often say and feel, but **the promise of God** – the promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ – is that there is a life that is better than anything we could grasp or attain on our own—**that there is a life – a fullness of life – that can only be found in God – in God's Kingdom and reign.**

And so **Advent** invites us to live with **this** hope – and to wait... to **wait eagerly**... (as Paul says).

And one of the ways it does this is through the stories of others who have learned to wait. So, if you have a Bible, turn with me to

**Luke 1:5-25.**

And **let's PRAY** as we dive into the story. -----

**Luke 1:5** – "*In the time* of Herod King of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah..." [**let's STOP THERE!**]

Do you hear the deep pain in this simple verse... the deep injustice and longing in this opening line?

*"In the time of Herod King of Judea..."*

Right there, in the opening line of this story we are confronted by **a profound tension**, a painful reality that every Jew felt. This reality of being **God's people**, God's **chosen** people – a people of promise – *under the oppressive power of the Romans.*

*"In the time of Herod King of Judea..."*

For centuries, since the time of the prophets, but even before, since the days of their oppression in Egypt, the Israelites had lived with **God's promise** – *they were enabled to face the future because of their hope in God's promise* – to one day break into human history again – as He did in the Exodus – to rescue and restore His people, to throw off the oppressors, to do away with evil and injustice, and usher in the good reign of God..

But here they were, centuries later, *in their own land*, **yet under the oppressive power of a pagan ruler – Herod.**

What a humiliation that he took upon himself the title, "King of Judea – King of the Jews"...

This is the essential context of this story – something Luke (the gospel writer) intends for us to be aware of **right** from the start.

**These are a people who are waiting... waiting for God...**

**Back to the text (v.5)** – "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 descendent of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly." **(stop there)**

Again, these opening words are significant – this is an **incredible** introduction to and description of **Zechariah & Elizabeth.**

*There are few people described in scripture, or even history, with these kinds of credentials and accolades.*

We're told that Zechariah was a priest, in the line of Abijah.

**Which didn't really set him apart.** A lot of men were priests. Anyone in the line of Aaron was a priest.

There were probably **20,000 priests** scattered across Palestine in Zechariah's day. Almost **1000** in Zechariah's clan alone.

Not that it wasn't an honor. **It was.** An honor that Zechariah would have *cherished*. **But it wasn't rare.**

There were so many priests that each division only had two one-week shifts **a year** at the Temple – **two weeks** (along with serving at Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles).

But what sets Zechariah apart is his *devotion*—to God and to his wife (*which we'll get to*). Amidst everything, amidst all that life brought him, amidst all the unexpected challenges and disappointments of his life (*which we'll get to*), Zechariah is described as a man who lived in unwavering *devotion to God*, obeying **all** God's commands and decrees – seeking to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God.

And with this, he was *devoted to his wife* – Elizabeth.

***More devoted than many would have required of him.***

**Let me explain...**

Like I said, Zechariah was a priest in the line of Abijah. He **had** a day job (being a priest two weeks a year didn't make for much of a living), but he was *known as a priest*. And coupled with his deep devotion to God, this made for an impressive resume. He was the kind of man that, in his youth, any parent would want for their daughter.

And so years before, decades before, he had married Elizabeth, who seemed like the perfect match for him. **Her** devotion to God matched **his**. And on top of this, she was a descendant of Aaron (from

the priestly line). *No one could have imagined a better match for either of them.*

Now, priests could only marry women of **pure Jewish heritage**. But in marrying Elizabeth, Zechariah had gone *a step further*. He married a *godly* woman who also was *a descendent of Aaron*. He couldn't have done better really.

Their wedding day was probably one of those days that people still talked about decades. It would have been a day of great celebration. No one could have imagined a better wife for Zechariah, and no one could have imagined a better husband for Elizabeth. *What better heritage could be passed on to their children—a priestly heritage, a godly heritage.*

And because of all this, everyone would have walked home from their wedding full of joy and blessing and hope for this young couple, for their marriage and the years they would share, **and the children that they would have and raise and be blessed with...**

But over the coming years, as they text goes on to tell us, **(v.7)** *"They were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old."*

For all of their attempts, and for all of their devotion to God, their righteousness, their soul-deep prayers and longing and dreams,

the years did pass, but no children came... Elizabeth could not conceive. She was barren.

And as you can imagine, (as some of you know by experience) this would have been shattering for them. For them **both**. They would have dreamt together many times (during their courtship and betrothal) of the family they'd have. They probably already had names chosen and prioritized (Shadrak, Mishak, Abednego, Rachel, Sarah, Hannah, **and Thunder!**). Like everyone else, they thought they'd start with five or six, and then go from there. Elizabeth might have even had a set of little cloth diapers in her hope-chest. She would have always dreamed of being a mom and just **assumed** it would happen...

***But it hadn't. It didn't. And it was shattering.***

But more than just being a deep disappointment, this is what everyone understood to be the purpose of marriage. Having children was viewed as the primary expression of God's blessing. As Psalm 127 says, "*Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him... Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.*"

Which means, to be barren wasn't just a **physiological** problem, it was perceived as a **spiritual** problem - as **God's punishment**. Not that that was always the case, but people tended to *think this way*.



So, for Elizabeth, barrenness didn't just mean the loss of a dream, it meant the loss of her **reputation**. As she reveals later in the story, this was a **disgrace** that she always carried with her.

And through it all, Zechariah never wavered in his devotion to her. Like I said, *his devotion went deeper than others would have required of him*.

You see, in Zechariah's day, as horrific as it sounds, childlessness was considered **valid grounds for divorce**. Being barren wasn't just a disgrace to Elizabeth; it was a disgrace to **Zechariah**. Not that it was considered his fault, but it reflected on him. Some Rabbis, when listing off those who were unacceptable to God, included in their list, "a Jew who has a wife and who has no children". No one would have chastised him for divorcing her. Many probably thought he should have. But he didn't. He wouldn't.

He was **devoted to her**. He **loved** her. And for years, they would have tried again and again to conceive, praying together, pleading with God, hoping against hope that God would open her womb and allow her to conceive. **For years**, this hope would have kept them going, kept them trying...

But by **the time we meet them – in Luke 1** – they are now old – very old (we're told). And they have given up hope of having a child.

Their longing for a child remained strong—***painfully*** strong.

And they still prayed for this. (*we're told this in the story*). But their hope, their faith, their expectation to have children was **gone**. By now they'd resigned themselves that it just wasn't going to happen.

Day after day, year after year, decade after decade, **this** very real longing—for a child—shaped the terrain of their souls, their hearts and lives.....

And one day, while Zechariah, now late in life, was on one of his annual weeks of priestly duty, one of His dreams came true. He was chosen by lot to go into **the temple of the Lord**, into the priestly sanctuary (just outside the holy of holies) to burn incense.

This was an *incredible* honor. Something that every priest dreamed of, and yet might never be chosen to do.

Zechariah's heart must have leapt at the sound of his name. He'd would have waited all his life for this. After all these years, you'd think he'd probably lost hope that his turn would ever come.

One of the temple officers would have pulled him aside to explain to him what he'd be doing, but he already would have known it. For years, he'd studied and watched as others had done this, preparing himself in case he was every chosen. He probably knew every step, could recite the instructions along with the officer:

*Just after the evening sacrifice is made you're going to enter the priestly sanctuary and burn incense on the incense altar (that*

*the sacrifice might go up to God wrapped in an envelope of sweet fragrance). Then you'll prostrate yourself before the altar and exit **immediately**. While you're in there, the worshippers will gather just outside the court, and you will come out of the inner court, come to the rail between the two courts and offer a blessing on the people.*

Much like listening to the flight attendant's instructions on an airplane, he didn't need to be told anything. He'd walked himself through it many times before.

The time finally came, and Zechariah went in on cue – through the curtain into the sanctuary (the holy place) of the Lord, to the altar to burn the incense. We're told **(v.10)**, "*And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.*"

He **stepped to the altar. Lit the incense.** Leaned forward to prostrate himself.... **And realized that he was not alone...** He wasn't the only one in the sanctuary – and he knew immediately that it was not another priest.

As he turned his eyes to the right of the altar, Zechariah found himself staring into the **eyes of something that radiated holiness.** Something he'd never seen before. Something he'd only heard of and read about. But there was no question about it. He was in presence of **an Angel**. Although the word hardly does justice to the magnificent Being before him. The Angel towered over him, only a few feet away, and was... [*well there just aren't words for it.*]

Zechariah was **shaken, shaking, pierced** with fear. For a moment, he thought his heart had actually stopped. He felt like he should get on his knees or on his face, but he couldn't move. He was paralyzed with fear.

And then the angel spoke. "**Don't be afraid, Zechariah.**"

It knew his name?

**"Your prayer has been heard."**

*What? Which prayer?*

**"Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to name him John."**

The meaning of the name – **God is gracious** – would not have been lost on Zechariah. *I wonder if he cried? I would've.*

The angel continued, "**He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.**"

Can you imagine how these words – this announcement – would have impacted Zechariah? As the angel described to him what would have seemed like the fulfillment of so many of their life-long prayers and longings?

But the angel continued,

**"He is never to drink wine or other fermented drinks, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of**

*the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

Zechariah heard every word, but it would have been so overwhelming, and hard to believe. **A son?! After all these years – a son?!**

*A son who will be great in the sight of God?! A son set apart by God for God, filled with the Holy Spirit from birth?! A son who would grow up to lead many back to know and love and honor God?! A son who would grow up to be the one prophesied about, who would prepare Israel for the coming of the kingdom!?*

**Could it be?** The fulfillment of **all** their longings—a son, but more than that, a son who would prepare Israel for the coming of the Lord?

**It was incredible.** But that's just it. It seemed in-**credible** – hard to believe, hard to trust. It didn't seem **doable**.

I mean, it was everything and more than he and Elizabeth had dreamt and prayed for. But **how could it be true?** *At this stage of their lives. After all these years. After all the changes their bodies had gone through.* Elizabeth could **never** conceive, but especially not **now** – not at this stage of her life.

I wonder how long it was before Zechariah's thoughts spilled out, but they did. **v.18** - *"How can I be sure of this? I'm an old man and my wife is well along in years."*

*How can you expect me to believe what you're saying?*

He would have **wanted** to believe it. He would have **wanted** to have faith that God would do this. But it just didn't make any sense. It just seemed *impossible*.

**Now, I love the angel's response.** It's almost comical.

Listen! **V.19** - *"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and tell you this good news."*

It as though the angel says to him, "**Really?** Who do you think I am? Does this look like a costume to you? *I'm Gabriel. The very messenger of God.* I don't show up to play tricks on people. I've been sent to tell you **what God will do**. And whether you have faith for it or not, it *will* happen... **It will happen.**"

And so he **continues**, *"And 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 appointed time."*

In other words: Since you didn't believe what **I** spoke, **you** will not be able **to speak** – *until my words are fulfilled*.

And with that, the Angel was gone and Zechariah found himself standing alone and silent before the altar.

Outside, people were starting to get worried. We're told, **(v.21)** *"Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple."*

You see, **everything** in the temple *ran on a clock*. Everything had been done **a thousand times** before. Everyone knew when to gather to sing the Hallel, and when to watch the priest emerge from inside the sanctuary and receive his benediction...

It doesn't take long to burn the incense at the altar.

Everyone would have known: **something was up**.

So, when he **finally** emerged from behind the curtain, they would have come running to hear what he had to say, to explain why he'd been so long, and to receive his Benediction. But he couldn't speak. They had to piece it together from his gestures that he'd seen a vision – but **that was it**. Which probably didn't surprise them: when a man goes into the inner court of the temple and comes out mute, there wasn't much to explain.

For the rest of the week, Zechariah would have gone about his duties – **in silence**. *Though not on the inside*. Inside he must have been a non-stop worship service! Marveling at the grace of God. Wondering how Elizabeth would take the news, and how he'd tell her.

And when his assignment was over, **he went home**, to Elizabeth, with a smile on his face. And after a few failed attempts to explain to her what had happened, and what it all meant, he simply took her hand and invited her close...

**And it happened... She conceived...**

In the twilight of her life, her belly popped and she glowed like a young woman. I'm sure she could hardly believe it. But there was no denying it. **(v.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."*

She must have beamed... with anticipation, and thankfulness, and **wonder** at the wisdom and power and plan of God.

And **with** renewed faith, hope, expectation – growing in her just as real as this child... a *growing* conviction, faith, hope... **a palpable knowledge** that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Creation and the Exodus still comes to His people... still comes near to bless... to take away our shame... **and to save...**

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**What a story. I love it.**

One that I've often come back to – especially in Advent.

Often with a particular appreciation for the **example** of Zechariah and Elizabeth's **long obedient waiting**, and the beautiful invitation to **wait together**... That like these two, we need companions in our waiting.

But what's caught me this time around isn't actually the story – but **the song of praise** that Zechariah erupts with upon the birth of their son – John (later to be known as John the Baptist).



Because for all of their life-long ache, prayer and waiting for a child, Zechariah's praise – in the end – isn't as much about the gift of his son, as it is about the gift of God's coming...

**Luke 1:68f**

*"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 with that he goes on to speak of his son,

*"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."*

This to me is amazing.

And a glimpse of God's powerful work in their lives.

**Why?**

Because for all the gift that John's birth and life would be to them, it would not ultimately be the answer to their need, and the need of the world.

Honestly, if we were to trace the story of John's subsequent life – we'd hear the story of a hard life, a costly calling, which by his mid-thirties has him in prison, and then shortly after beheaded at the whim of the Herod's latest wife – as a prize for her daughter's impressive performance.

All that to say, John's **life** is a testament to truth that the world still needs a Saviour. John's life would not mean the end of Zechariah and Elizabeth's suffering or the fulfillment of all their hopes.

***No, this would only come through the coming of God.***

And somehow, in the grace of God, Zechariah and Elizabeth's deep and long waiting – hoping – and praying for a child – did not ***overtake or diminish*** their longing for God's coming, but actually *intensified it. Multiplied it. Turned it into their **deepest** longing and hope.*

Oh, they ***loved*** their son – and ***thanked God*** for him – but not as God's **ultimate answer** for their ache and need – and that of the world.

***No, this, they knew, would only come in Christ.***

And this is a work of grace that we all need, is it not?

***How easily and how often we end up **waiting on God** – but not **FOR God!*****

How easily and how often we end up convinced that **something** – if only we could attain it – will be the answer that will satisfy our every need, cure our every ache, and make the world right again...

*For Zechariah and Elizabeth, it could easily have been the dream of a child.*

*For you and I, it could be the same or something else all-together. It could be a marriage, or a better marriage, a career, or a different career... A homecoming or a fresh-start... It could be a relationship or a different relationship... A new boss, or no boss... Retirement or not having to retire... It could be health or healing from something that ails us or another...*

*You fill in the blank - \_\_\_\_\_.*

But, if Zechariah and Elizabeth's story teaches us anything – it is that all our longings, though not necessarily wrong, are ultimately just an echo of **our deeper need and ache for God Himself...**

And, in the grace of God, **this is the call of Advent** – to raise our eyes to **the True Horizon – JESUS** – the One who alone will satisfy our every need, cure our every ache, and make the world truly right again – when He comes...

**This is the invitation of Advent** – not to **ignore or deny** the good and real soul-deep longings that we live with, pray for, and wait on God for – but to allow these longings to point us toward our **deepest need** and a **greatest hope** – for God Himself - *who has come to us in Christ – and for whom we eagerly wait.*

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**O God, in this Advent season,  
teach our hearts to hunger for a deeper Cure  
– and to wait with hope – for You.**