



December 14, 2014
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*What do you want for Christmas, Zechariah?
A Baby!*
Luke 1:5-17, 20

I want to thank you all for granting Larry and me two weeks of vacation. We spent the first week in Memphis. We got to celebrate the upcoming wedding of my brother and the 90th birthday of my grandma. We were with **so** many people! So our second week was the total opposite. We disappeared into the mountains where our cell phones did not work. It's a crazy feeling when your phone doesn't work, isn't it? I had brief feelings of guilt for people who might be trying to get ahold of me. At least if you emailed, you got an "out of office" message, but if you were texting or calling, you would have no idea why I wouldn't return your call! Have you ever tried so hard to get a hold of someone and you just can't get through??

Our story today is about a group of people and about one couple in particular who prayed for a long time without knowing if their prayer was getting through. This story is also about me, and I believe it is also about you. This Christmas story is for any of us who ask, "Does anyone hear me?" I invite you to consider before we even start—what have you been praying about for a long time without an answer? Or if you're not one to talk to God—what is it that you've been waiting to see happen in your life?

Let me tell you about what the group of people in our story were waiting and talking to God about. Back in the main Jewish city, Jerusalem, more than 2,000 years ago, everyone was waiting for Christmas—not for the day as we know it with Santa and presents, but waiting for the promised day when God would send someone to deliver them from their enemies and their sin. But God had been silent for 400 years. So for Christmas, the Jewish people want God to speak and to send a deliverer.

Luke's Gospel picks up the story with two unlikely people: Zechariah and Elizabeth. They live in Jerusalem. They're both from great families—descendants of Aaron, who was the first priest for the people of God. Luke 1:6 says that they were upright and blameless. These weren't just "good people." They were as good as it gets. Then Luke drops the bomb in verse 7. "But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren and they were both well along in years."

So we have a group of people waiting for a deliverer, and we have a couple waiting for a child. Remember, we are asking, what are we waiting for?

God's word for us today begins with Zechariah's once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to pray just before the Holy of Holies, which is as close as you can get to God's presence. Because Zechariah is a priest, he gets to go and light incense right in front of the massive curtain that is the only barrier between him and where God said he would dwell, but where, remember, God hasn't shown up in 400 years. So there, in the dense, fragrant smoke of the incense, he talks to God. What do you think he's talking about?

Well, Zechariah's on assignment, so he definitely has to pray representing the people—asking for what they want: for God to speak to his people and send a deliverer! That's simply his job. But as long as he's in this holiest place, don't you think he's going to ask for the one thing he has wanted for his whole life?

Let's pick up in Luke 1:10.

"And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and gripped with fear. But 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. 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. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.'"

This is the word of the Lord.

Can you picture this moment with me? Zechariah kneeling in the incense and the fog, astounded—afraid, understandably!—of the angel's presence, and then astounded all the more by God's answer to his prayer, finally. "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son." After 400 years of silence, the first message God has is just for Zechariah. He's getting what he wants for Christmas—a son. He's promised a good son, too, a joy and a delight, greatness, even filled with the Holy Spirit—God who has been gone is now going to dwell in his son! Can you imagine?? What a Christmas present.

Do you remember what it was I asked you to think about in the beginning? What you've been asking God for or what you've been waiting to see happen? Imagine an angel appearing you tonight to tell you God's response to what you've been waiting for!

When I first sat down with an inspiration to write this sermon it was at the end of October. I had such a big smile on my face as I pictured Zechariah stunned by this

joyful announcement. But that particular night my face was stained from a long night of crying.

Larry and I are familiar with Zechariah's prayer. I've been fairly quiet about living a diagnosis of "infertile" for almost 3 years. But it's been 7 years for us of not getting pregnant. I've been desperate. Each month feels like a new level of desperation. I've known what it is to see my friends moving into a stage of life that I'm excluded from. I've been in doctor's offices where the shared diagnosis has everyone staring in their laps.

Praise be to God that I don't know the experience of 400 years of God's silence. He's been speaking all along. The more I've withdrawn in my grief, the closer I've drawn to God—mostly through reading the promises in his Word. And I will say—it's been meeting Jesus in this Word even in the last 12 months that has brought the most sincere transformation in my life. God's even been speaking to us in words and showing us visions of promise for children. I can honestly say I have seen and heard from God. But month after month, as it regards this particular prayer for a child, God remains silent. And I have remained barren.

Remember our friends from Daniel? The ones who said God is able to rescue us from a fiery death, but even if he does not... And we saw God rescue them by coming to be with them **in** the fire? Well let me testify, God has been rescuing me in this fire. I know he is good. The most powerful moment of knowing that was the week after I preached that Daniel message and had a particularly challenging medical day. But I **knew** God was with me in the fire! And I walked so freely that day with smiles and joy so much that one of the medical people said—what is different about you? And I got to share Daniel's story with her. I know God is with me! And I still want a baby.

I feel like I can't help but continue to pray as if I'm asking God—Can I just not get through to you on this one? I've been praying Psalm 130: *"Out of the depths, I cry to you, O LORD. O LORD, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!"* Mercy, Lord, mercy. I know God is with me. I know He's in this fire with me. Still, I'm crying out do you hear me?? I know this desperate place of wanting just one thing. And so I can imagine what it's like to be Zechariah, an old man—my 7 years of infertility times 10—right at the threshold of God's mercy, begging him, wailing out to a God who seems silent, praying for just that one prayer to be answered.

Oh, I know God hears. I know he's good. I know I'm being changed, and I just want this one circumstance to change. But I'm learning that God doesn't move heaven and earth just for the one thing I am waiting for. Oh, no, God's purposes are so much bigger. See how God answers this wannabe dad in such a bigger way than he could ever have imagined!

Come back with me into the story of Zechariah and the Israelites see what a bigger, epic, Kingdom story God is writing with our longings and in the midst of our waiting. The angel has just told Zechariah that he will have a son named John who will always know the presence of God. And then this, verse 16, *“Many of the people of Israel will he bring back 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 fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”* John is the beginning of God’s answer because he is going to prepare the way for Jesus, the long awaited deliverer.

One of our professors in seminary encouraged us to look at this story and see how God answered Zechariah’s personal prayers and “weaved them into the tapestry of the Kingdom.”

See, I’m reading into this a bit, but my guess is that Zechariah started by praying what he needed to pray— for the deliverer—and then he prayed what he needed to pray, for a son. After all, God’s answer is first, yes. Yes a son! I heard you prayer, and Elizabeth will give birth. That was the first answer God provided. And then God, in the way that only our God can also answers the epic, 400 year old prayer of waiting, “Yes. Yes a Savior, a deliverer, for my people.” So do you see that God’s answer of a son for Zechariah and Elizabeth gets to be woven into the bigger picture of what God is doing in bringing His Kingdom to earth?

Because the big prayer, the truly seemingly impossible prayer was for God to provide a way back for the whole world to come back to relationship with him— with God, the Holy God, the God who abandoned his temple 400 years previously because of the wickedness, the injustice and flagrant misuse of wealth and disobedience of his people! The seemingly impossible prayer was for a sacrifice that could justify allowing a sinful people before a holy God forever! And God himself answers this prayer by sending his **own** Son into the world. His Son will be the Messiah, the anointed one; he will be the Christ, the crucified one, who can turn the hearts of a disobedient, wayward people back to their heavenly Father. Jesus, the only Christmas present the world has ever needed, came in answer to this prayer of the priests for centuries.

And Zechariah, the desperate wannabe dad, gets to be part of that story. For the angel promises that his son, John, will prepare people for Jesus to come. Elizabeth and Zechariah’s wait was not in vain, for their desire for a son—the years they spent excluded and passed over, counting month-to-month—those years brought prayers to God that were true to his own design. And their years of waiting were woven into the eternal story of God. Eternity is the answer God makes of all our prayers. And he has made eternity available to each of us in the person of Jesus. Not just eternity out there, but in the Spirit of Jesus, as we’ve studying all fall, the eternal Kingdom of God is right here in our midst, now.

And so I, the desperate wannabe mom, and maybe you, the desperate wannabe well, or the desperate wanna have that one member of the family home, or the desperate wanna have presents for Christmas morning, or the desperate wanna be married... we the desperate ask, "Well, when, God? Do you hear me? Have you heard the prayers I've been praying for 3 years? for 7 years? for 70 years? Do you hear us?" And the Christmas story says, Yes. God hears you. The baby John says yes, God hears the personal prayers. Jesus born in a manger says yes, God hears the prayers of all his people. And more than God just hearing, these stories say that God is good, and that God loves his people! God answers pray by saying—here I am! I'm with you. I've come in the person of Jesus, and now my Spirit will never leave you. I'm in the fire with you. Our God hears, and he is good.

Now these stories don't say that the circumstances are good or that the answer is coming when and how you want it. So when we ask, "When, God?" hear the last words of the angel to Zechariah in verse 20—"My words will come true at their proper time."

And so we wait for the proper time. What's the proper time? I don't know. But I know that even if our circumstances don't change, all will be answered in the eternity of living with Jesus—living with him now, and living with him forever.

This is no cop out. This is the real thing. Here's the problem with me, and I dare say with us we're single-track minded. I think this is just about us having a baby. And if you keep your waiting in that frame of mind, then whether or not you get what you want when you want it will determine in your mind whether or not you believe that God hears and is good. But that's not our God. Our God has revealed himself in this word and in the word becoming flesh in the person of Jesus. And this true story says that God hears. And He is Good.

And I'm telling you, I am more sure the longer I wait that God is not just answering my prayer for a baby, but he's answering my prayer to be a part of his Kingdom and to see his Kingdom come and his will be done on earth as it is heaven. And just like he answered Zechariah's prayer for a son **and** for a deliverer, I am sure that God is answering my personal prayers and that he is answering your prayers, weaving them into the tapestry of the Kingdom. And so we wait until the proper time and we expect him to answer. And I am being transformed as I genuinely trust God and am assured, desperately assured of his love for me and of his goodness even as he hasn't given us yet what we most want.

What do you want for Christmas? Lift up your eyes. See how God is writing large the story of the Kingdom in your life... in your waiting, in your prayers, in your desperation. Oh how he hears you. The story God is writing is an eternal story. So don't be single-track minded. Know and wait expectantly to see how our good God is weaving your season of waiting into an eternal story that ends in sure redemption and in confident hope.

He hears our prayers. So I want us to pray personally and as a people in this Advent season of waiting. We're going to make an old-school paper chain. This is going to be a chain of hope and a chain of waiting. In your bulletin, you'll find two strips of paper. Let me start by saying, you do not need to write your name. But write on that green slip of paper something you waited for that God supplied, and be specific!—a job title, a child's name, a Bible passage of hope, a prayer he answered. And on the red slip of paper I want you to write down what you are waiting for, specifically. We're going to hang this in the Prayer Chapel through New Year's Eve. I invite you to come and pray over the praises and the longings of your church family. Consider coming as a LifeGroup or as a family. Be reminded that God hears your prayer. And God's promises to us have come true in Jesus Christ and will come true in their proper time.

If you're in a season of waiting, you don't have to wait alone. Some of the same people I have had praying with Larry and me in our season of waiting are here on our prayer team, and after the benediction they'll be here to pray for you. If you don't want to come down today, come back tomorrow night. They pray every Monday at 6:00 in the Prayer Chapel. If it's time to talk through your longing, I want to let you know about the lay counseling that is available here. I have seen a counselor in this season, and I think people who listen are a tremendous gift given by the Holy Spirit to the Church. You can come down to talk with someone or you can sign up at the Connect Center to set up a separate time to meet with a counselor.

And can I just ask a personal favor? And I really need you to hear me out on this okay? I shared something incredibly personal with you, and I felt prompted to do that by God while we are still in the midst of our waiting. It can be inauthentic to only hear followers of Jesus talk about their pain when it's over and done with. Ours isn't. God is still working on open wounds in us. So I say this tenderly but firmly, and I speak for both me and Larry—you will cause us pain if you bring us the happy ending to your season of infertility. What would be an encouragement is if you pray for us and if you email or mail us Scripture that helped you through your season of waiting.

But I do want you to share any season of waiting you've been in! So I want to suggest something else. I had this idea of what it would look like if 1200 people left today with a message of hope to share. I want to encourage you—there are people in your life who are waiting. You have the words of truth to speak hope. And all of you who wrote on a green slip of paper have an experience to share that says, "God hears and he is good." Please, take all that energy that wants to come running to us and run to the people in your life. Open a conversation after the church or at Christmas parties with something like, "I've been wanting to share something with you—about something we've waited for that finally happened or something we are waiting to see happen."

Larry and I are going to go into a back room after the service and pray for those of you who are waiting—that you'll let people pray with you and listen to you. And we're going to pray that each of you will be as bold and vulnerable to share your stories of waiting along with the hope that God hears and is good.

I invite you to surrender your waiting to this group of people for prayer. You can hand your slips of paper to an elder on your way out, and leave them connected with all the rest of ours. I invite you to read other people's prayers and talk with God on their behalf. Remember who it is you're talking to—a God who hears you and who is good. Let's let this Christmas be a season of remembering and sharing the answer that our waiting is over in Jesus!