

November 29, 2020

“Altar-ed Christmas: Zechariah”

Luke 1:1-24

Weariness, discouragement, uncertainty, fear, anger, isolation, disappointment. That list should at least cover one or more of the feelings you and I may be currently experiencing. Great way to start an Advent sermon, right?

Usually when we think of Advent and Christmas we are more often filled with feelings of excitement, joy, peace, hope, love, and anticipation. And while those feelings may be there, perhaps those other, former feelings I mentioned, feel a bit stronger and more prevalent.

And ya know what, it’s ok. It is good to name those feelings and things that we are experiencing rather than ignore or push them aside because they are real and true feelings, and either way they are going to come out somewhere. Truly this has been a difficult year.

But as followers of Jesus, we are not without hope. This season of advent and Christmas is a time full of hope and good news. It is a reminder that God is with us and meets us where we are at and is faithful to all of His promises.

And whether you are feeling weary, angry, fear or disappointment. Let me assure you, you are not alone in what you are experiencing.

In fact, as we enter into this season of Advent, we discover a lot of these same very feelings and emotions surrounding that very first advent season and the time leading up to that first Christmas and birth of our savior Jesus Christ.

Talk about weariness, uncertainty and even disappointment. For God’s people it had been a long long time between the last recorded words from God through His prophet Malachi and where we pick up our passage in Luke. We are talking like a “400 +years long time” of waiting and wondering, “God where are you?” How long O God? Where is the Messiah you promised?

I remember as a kid being told, “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.” Especially after I would get caught doing something, I knew was wrong to which I would quickly reply with a promise to never again do whatever it was I got caught doing. Little Jason would boldly declare, “I promise to never lie again!” Or “I promise to never tease my siblings again!” Which of course were promises I definitely didn’t keep.

Don’t make promises you can’t keep.

Yet, all throughout the Bible we discover and see God’s promises everywhere because God loves making promises and God does not hesitate in making them. But the difference is, when God makes a promise, we see over and over again His faithfulness in keeping those promises. God does not make promises He can’t keep.

The promise of a messiah, the One who would save us from our sin. The One who would make us holy and restore a right relationship between us and God. This promise of God is an ancient promise that goes back to Genesis and in the garden right after Adam and Eve rebelled and turned from God and sinned.

We see that even in that moment of guilt and disobedience, God laid out His promised plan for humanity's newly needed rescue and the promise of salvation through the coming of a Messiah.

But as time went on and God's people continued to wait and the feelings of weariness began to pile up, I imagine God's people began to wonder, "perhaps this promise is different. What if this is the one that God doesn't answer and doesn't keep?"

For us, here and now, we have the advantage of knowing the big reveal at the end of this first Advent. The truth that God is faithful and keeps His promise and in His perfect time He sent Jesus our messiah and savior to be born, to live, and to die for the salvation from our sins.

Even so we know those feelings of waiting, weariness, and disappointment.

The same feelings I imagine Zechariah and Elizabeth may have felt and experienced as for years they must have prayed for a child only to continually be confronted by the ongoing cultural label of disgrace and then having to eventually come to terms with their ever-increasing age and the disappointing reality, they would never have a child.

This is where Luke begins his gospel. The birth account of John the Baptist. The one who would prepare the way for Jesus the messiah. The one to be born to a well off in years, childless, couple- Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Luke describes them as:

Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

This is an important description Luke includes here. For one, it takes away the cultural stigma at that time that if a woman was not able to have a child it was often thought it was because God was punishing her for some sin. This was not the case at all. Zechariah and Elizabeth lived blamelessly and followed God's law. They were not being punished.

But there is also another important truth I see here. Being righteous, or "good" doesn't exempt us from disappointment or weariness. It does not give us a "get out of trouble-free" card.

Even “righteous” people have disappointments in life. Even “righteous” people go through difficult, troubling times.

But even in our disappointments and weariness, God meets us where we are at and extends a life-giving invitation. I just love the Message translation of Matthew 11:28-30.

Jesus gives us this live-giving invitation:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”(Matthew 11:28-30)

Zechariah and Elizabeth. Godly, righteous people have lived with a deep disappointment never having the child they longed for and prayed for.

But God is at work and has been at work for such a time as this. And as Zechariah and Elizabeth are about to see, God is faithful to his promises. God hears our prayers. Even the ones we may have forgotten or given up on long ago.

It is not by chance that while on his priestly duty Zechariah is chosen by lot for this once in a lifetime opportunity to offer incense in the sanctuary of the Lord. Unknowingly Zechariah is about to experience a life-altering work of God.

We see God at work here, moving and orchestrating things in a new and fresh way to bring about His promised plan and story to redeem the world by sending the one(John) to prepare the way for the One(Jesus) who would take sin away from the world.

Here we see God was not only about to bring fulfillment to a promise made long ago but also an answer to a long-forgotten prayer.

I imagine as Zechariah prepares for his time of service in the temple, he is full of anticipation, nervousness, and gratefulness. He now finds himself in the holy place, offering incense, worshipping and praying on behalf of the people. Praying for their needs. Praying for God to send the Messiah. And then:

There appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. (Luke 1:11-12)

Zechariah might be thinking, “Woah, no one told me anything about this. Does this happen to everyone who does this? It is no wonder Zechariah is terrified and filled with fear as he is in the presence of a heavenly being.

The angel tells him, do not be afraid, your prayer has been heard. But which prayer has been heard?

A couple years ago we went through Walter Wangerin's advent devotional "Preparing for Jesus." I just love what he says as he reflects about Zechariah's prayer that has been heard.

"Who knows when Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed the prayer the angel mentions? Surely it was long ago, before they had grown old...It must have grown more anguished as longer and longer grew the time when God did not answer it. But after a certain age reality must have persuaded the childless couple to stop praying for the impossible."

"By now, they had probably forgotten the prayer itself. Surely they believed that its purpose was past – and that the answer, long ago had been, 'No.' But here is the first of our lessons today: that God does not forget our prayers. It is in the fullness of time that He answers them." (Preparing for Jesus, p.38)

God does not forget our prayers!

Maybe we find ourselves like Zechariah and Elizabeth. We pray for something for a long, long time. We pray for the salvation of a family member, a child, or friend. We pray for that job or calling. We pray that God would bring that special person to us. We pray for healing. We pray for deliverance. But after years of heartfelt prayer, waiting, and growing weary we give up out of discouragement and disappointment.

And when we find ourselves in that place, we sometimes begin in both small and large ways to doubt the love and care God has for us. Or we think "I must have done something wrong." But as it was then it is now. God never stops hearing our prayers, and His love and care for us never ends.

God may not give us the answer we want when we want but God always hears and answers our prayers and cares for us with a deep deep love.

For Zechariah, I can only imagine the overwhelming thoughts and questions that are running through his mind and heart as the angel Gabriel tells him all these things.

- Elizabeth will bear a son, to be named John
- He will be a joy and delight to you, and many others
- He will be great in the sight of the Lord.
- He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.
- He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

All exciting and good news! But we see Zechariah's initial response wasn't one of praising God, or gratitude. It wasn't one of faith in God making the impossible, possible. Instead, it was a response of unbelief... of doubt and questioning.

"How can I be sure of this I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years" ... Well at least we see he has some wisdom here in not calling his wife is old.

Either way he doubts. Perhaps he may be thinking it must be too good to be true, and he has probably protected himself from disappointment by not setting his expectations too high.

And even though Zechariah's unbelief did not take away God's promise for him and Elizabeth, the consequence of his initial unbelief would end up keeping him from immediately enjoying it.

The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. (And it was all wonderful and great news) But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." (Luke 1:19-20)

This is where I think the game charades was invented...imagine getting this one. How do you act out an angel appearing and telling you that you are going to have a son? And then go through the motions all over again when he returns home to his wife Elizabeth.

But I imagine that time of silent waiting for Zechariah was truly an amazing time of growth and deepening of his faith as Zechariah had no choice but to listen to and trust God. I believe in those still quiet moments as Zechariah had to rely on trusting that God would be faithful to His promise that he began to see all the ways God had been at work and was at work and his heart was filled with joy and gratitude.

And ya know, it can be easy to point the finger at Zechariah in his lack of faith, and doubt. But if I'm being honest, there are times that I have responded just like Zechariah. I find myself doubting and not allowing myself to truly believe that God is actually answering my prayer. Or maybe it was a prayer I had stopped praying for long ago.

Have you been there? Are you there now? You've prayed and prayed and prayed – but it seemed like God never heard, or that God was ignoring you, or giving you the silent treatment. Maybe you've stopped praying. Maybe you've stopped believing. Maybe you've stopped hoping.

Our passage today is a reminder and hope filled message we all need to hear. Let me echo the words of Gabriel, "God has heard your prayer." God never forgets our prayers. And even in waiting, which we all know is difficult, we can trust in the goodness of God's timing and purposes.

It may not always be an answer in the way we want it or when we want it, but God is listening and God is moving, and God is always working all things, even our disappointments for good, for His glory, and for His kingdom to come here on earth as it is in heaven.

And more than that, by God's amazing grace and unconditional love our disbelief or doubt does not keep God from accomplishing his purposes or keeping His promises.

God always keeps his promises. He kept his promises to His people. He kept his promises to Zechariah. And He will keep His promises to us now and forever.

This is the good news of Christmas and the greatest promise of God.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)