

Remember when you were a kid...how much you looked forward to Christmas?

It probably looked something like this...Elf Clip.

I remember laying awake, trying to make myself go to sleep so Christmas morning would get here quicker...only to be unable to fall asleep because I was so excited about the presents! I looked forward to getting the GI Joe with the Kung Fu grip.

I don't look forward to Christmas the way I used to. Most people don't as they become adults. You stop getting toys, you buy yourself what you want the rest of the year so Christmas isn't a big surprise...we do actually become a bit jaded.

We are starting a new message series called Gathered Around the Manger, and we will be looking at some of the key players from around Jesus' birth, and how they can provide us with some insight into our own place in the world and response to the work of God around us and through.

We are doing this as part of Advent. Advent is period of four Sundays prior to Christmas Day where the Church remembers the anticipation, much like our childhood Christmas', of waiting for the Messiah to come into our world as a baby. It is the yearly reminder of the excitement of waiting. But there is also a tension in waiting...that's why we also use this time to remind ourselves that we are currently waiting for the Messiah to come again.

In our world, the season of Advent could not be more appropriate. There are so many people struggling with fear, so many people struggling to survive, so much war and pain and hunger and disease...that we, like the Israelites of Jesus' time should be looking forward...crying out for the return of Jesus to set things right.

God's ultimate purpose for our world is to free us from the pain and destruction of sin, the ravages of war, and the hurts associated with our fallen world. God's promise is to return and set things right, and I don't know about you, but I look forward to the day when there is no more pain and suffering and death in our world.

It is with this very similar attitude that people in 1st Century Palestine longed for the coming of God's promised Messiah. They were a conquered and mistreated people. They were prisoners in their own land. They were crying out for the coming of the Messiah!

By the time written about in Luke 1, Zechariah and Elizabeth had probably called out to God a million times asking for a child.

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 righteous in the sight of God,

observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Here we have this couple...They are a respected couple who take seriously what it means to follow God...Zechariah was a faithful priest at the Temple, Elizabeth was of a descendant of priests and well respected...except they couldn't have a child.

Despite all the good things they had in life, in this culture, not have a child was often a sign that God had not blessed them...or that they were harboring some hidden sin and God was refusing to give them a child. So despite all the outward signs of piety and righteousness, people still looked at them and felt they were "unblessed" in this life...or were some how inferior as followers of God.

And yet, God saw something very different. You would think, from their history, the Israelite people would be more sensitive to women struggling with barrenness, but they weren't.

Just think of the list of significant women from Israel's past who struggled with being barren: Sarah, without whom there would not even be a Jewish people until Isaac was born; Rachel, wife of Jacob who eventually became the mother of Joseph and Benjamin; Hannah, the mother of Samuel, one of Israel's greatest prophets...

All of them were looked as something less than...as inferior to everyone else...and yet God saw something very different in them.

As you and I reflect on this part of the passage, we can see...

**God sees something very different in us than anyone around us will ever see.**

God saw Zechariah and Elizabeth for who they truly were. When he looked at Zechariah and Elizabeth...he didn't see an unblessed childless couple...He saw a Father and Mother who were going to raise one of the greatest prophets their people had ever known. They were going to be the parents of the prophet who got to proclaim the coming of the Messiah!

God see you and I for who we truly are. He knows our deepest hurts, our greatest success, our strengths and our weaknesses...he know us better than we or anyone around knows us...and He loves us and includes us in His Kingdom.

We are never as good as those who praise us think we are, but neither are we as bad as our critics say we are...either way, God knows the truth...He sees something very different in each of us than those around can or could ever see.

He looked at Peter, the wavering, big-mouthed coward, and saw a rock who would lead the church. He looked at Matthew the Tax-Collector and saw someone who could lead

the church forward. He looked at Paul, the persecutor and murderer of Christians, and saw the world's greatest missionary...He looked at Zechariah and Elizabeth and saw parents who were going to raise a child that would lead Israel in repentance and turning from their sins.

You and I must constantly ask, What might God see in me? How might He call me to work for the Kingdom?

There have been many times since I was called into the ministry where I asked God if he was sure He didn't make a mistake with me...I don't know that I have found my own answer in that question, but I do that God calls...with all of our brokenness and hurt and strengths and weaknesses...and He extends his Kingdom through people like you and me.

Luke 1:8-17 continues

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 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 call him John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 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 before he is born. 16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 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."

There are some very interesting things happening in this part of the passage... Zechariah is doing his yearly, two-week stint working in the Temple, when he the lot is cast in his favor and he gets to do one of the most important jobs for a priest who isn't in line to be the High Priest.

The High Priest gets to enter the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement. This is the most important part of the Temple and is the place where the presence of God dwelt. If you weren't the High Priest, the most important job you could do was be the Officiant who lit burned the Incense on the Altar...and this would only happen once, maybe twice in the entire life of the priest.

Zechariah, in that moment, was nearer to the Presence of God, than anyone else as he stood just outside the Holy of Holies. Offering up the evening prayers of the people in front of the burning incense; while the worshipers gathered around outside to pray.

And in this moment, this once in a lifetime moment, the angel Gabriel appears...

There must be something powerful and awe-inspiring about angels because every times one shows up they have to tell people to not be afraid. While there is so much in this encounter we could talk about, the thing that stood out to me as I read was Gabriel's statement, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard."

There is some discussion in the commentaries about what "prayer" the angel is talking about. Zechariah and Elizabeth had probably prayed a million times longing for a child, and, now that they were well beyond childbearing age, their prayer had probably not been prayed in a very long time.

On the other hand, Zechariah is there in the Temple, praying before the Incense Altar, representing the people who were outside praying these words:"May the merciful God enter the Holy Place and accept with favor the offering of his people." And then crying out for the Messiah.

I don't know which "prayer" had been heard, but both had been prayed for a VERY long time and both have been seemingly ignored for a VERY long time, but both were about to be answered in this one act.

See,

### **God ALWAYS hears our prayers.**

Our prayers are always in the presence of God. He doesn't always answer the way we want or in the timeline we have set out for Him...But our prayers are always there.

And so many times we give up. There were many among the Jews who thought, "The Messiah is never going to come!" There is writing from this time period that started turning it into a metaphor or a story with a good moral. There were others who looked for a political leader. There were others who decided to work with the Romans because maybe that was what was needed. And another group decided to live in caves in the desert to wait for God to get them out of this evil world...

While none of them ever got the Messiah they wanted...they did get a Messiah. And Zechariah and Elizabeth were about to have the most unexpected answer to prayers they had stopped praying years ago

Maybe you have too have stopped praying? You weren't getting the answer you wanted or thought you deserved? Maybe you weren't "getting" an answer? Maybe you just gave up because it seems like it was never going to happen...

Maybe you just haven't started praying for anything...you don't see the use in prayer or you don't care enough about any one thing to pray that intently for it...

What would it take for you to find something so close to your heart that you would spend decades of your life praying for it to happen?

And then, what would your response be when you got it?

Luke 1:18-25

18 Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

19 The angel said to him, "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. 20 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."

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 22 When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

23 When his time of service was completed, he returned home. 24 After 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."

One writer says, "I find it amazing, but true to life, that upright, moral, church-going people -- even ministers -- can be so filled with unbelief, so immersed in a secular, scientific world-view, that they are unable bring themselves to believe that God can work a contemporary miracle. Some even construct elaborate theologies to explain why God can't, won't, or shouldn't perform a miracle today!"<sup>1</sup>

Zechariah asks, "How CAN I be sure of this?" Mary, the mother of Jesus, asks, "How WILL this happen?" Mary's question is one of process. She believed she just wanted to know the process. Zechariah's question is one of doubt...showing he wasn't sure could actually happen.

**When the time comes we have to trust God.**

I have to admit that I see myself in Zechariah more than Mary...and maybe you do too. Maybe you are like Mary and Elizabeth who responded by saying, "The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/1\\_5-25.htm](http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/1_5-25.htm)

But some of us are like Zechariah...Are you sure? Seriously? I'm old. She's old.

There are some of you sitting here think that you age makes you unable to make a contribution to the Kingdom of God. Or, you are using your age as an excuse to keep you from doing some great things for the Kingdom of God. I'm convinced that our desire to retire and get a house in a warmer climate and kick back is killing our church and communities. We need people of age who have experience and time to spend that on behalf of others...we need mentors and prayers and servants who invest in the generations coming up behind them instead of saying things like, "Can you believe how bad this generations is?" or "They are so rude and disrespectful!"

God calls us, regardless of age, to see ourselves as part of something great in the Kingdom He is building here...in the work he is creating here in Huber Heights. We need young and old alike to see themselves as a valuable part of what God is doing here through Crossroads...through the people of Crossroads in our communities and in our church.

If we are ever going to establish a church that reaches the hurting and the broken... makes a difference in the lives of people in our community...helps people find forgiveness and healing in Jesus Christ...find meaning and purpose for their lives...we all have to be praying, passionately, and listening for God's call...and then, believing Him when He calls us to take part.