



Central
Peninsula
Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

Be Prepared for Christmas

Luke 1:1–25

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series: *Who is at the Center of My Christmas?*

This morning we begin a three-week teaching series we are calling "Christmas #selfies." We all know what a selfie is, right? It's when someone pulls out their phone and takes a picture of himself, like this (take a selfie). Those oh-so-flattering selfies are posted to Facebook, Instagram and Twitter for all of us to enjoy or maybe not enjoy. Instagram has over 53 million photos tagged with the hashtag #selfie. The word "selfie" was mentioned in Facebook status updates over 368,000 times during a one-week period in October 2013. And while selfies can be extremely narcissistic (we all have someone we want to unfollow because selfies are all they ever post, am I right?), they are also a fun way to express yourself. Truth is, most of us have posted one!

What we are going to do in this teaching series is look at the Christmas story from the perspective of several lesser known people surrounding the birth of Christ. And we are going to ask the question, "Who is at the center of my Christmas?" Today, it's a selfie of both Elizabeth and Zechariah. Next week, a selfie of Herod. The week after, Joseph. And on Christmas Eve, we'll consider Anna. All these historical and biblical figures will help us to prepare for the greatest event in human history—God coming to earth as a baby.

Today I want us to talk about preparation. How do you prepare for Christmas? I bet you immediately started to think of decorations, lights, trees, buying gifts, and all the grocery shopping that will need to be done before December 25th. Those are important ways we all prepare for Christmas. But, if you are a follower of Jesus you know there is more. If we are not careful, many of us will fail to prepare spiritually for the birth of Jesus Christ and Christmas will come and go and some of us will wonder if anything really changed for us this year. That's why I love Advent. Advent is a season of preparation. It draws us back hundreds of years to the birth of Christ and points us to the future, when he returns again to this earth and makes all things right. Advent is designed to help us learn how to wait with great expectation. It prepares us to place our hope for something/someone better. That's why last week we lit the Hope candle. In my Advent readings this week, every Scripture I read was focused on the hope we have in Christ and his return.

The incredible story of Elizabeth and Zechariah, like Advent, will teach us the time-honored discipline of waiting. This Christmas #selfie will show us how God can grow us through the holy practice of waiting. Does anyone here like to wait? I don't. I'm the guy

who watches the popcorn bag in the microwave because I think it will pop faster! Elizabeth and Zechariah show us how to prepare for Christmas. It's a story of waiting. If you have ever wondered where God is during those times in your life where you are left waiting. Waiting for that job to come through. Waiting for the right person to come into our life. Waiting for your marriage to turn around. Waiting for your son to come back to the Lord. Waiting for your finances to change. If you have ever prayed for something for years and feel like God isn't listening. If you have ever dealt with a major disappointment in your life. If you've ever doubted God or felt shame from something in your life. If any of those things are true for you, then the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah is for you. Let's read from the Gospel of Luke 1:5-7.

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.

Elizabeth and Zechariah Were in Need of a Blessing

The Gospel of Luke is a biography of the life of Jesus written by a contemporary of Apostle Paul. Luke was a physician and wrote both this Gospel and the book of Acts. Luke, more than any other of the Gospel writers, focuses most on preparation. Maybe because as a doctor Luke knows the importance of preparation. Luke helps us to prepare for Christmas by telling us the story of an old Jewish priest and his wife. In these opening verses we learn several important things about them. Zechariah was a priest from the division of Abijah. In that day priests, those who served at the temple, were divided into 24 divisions. Zechariah was one of 18,000 different priests. As a priest, he would travel into Jerusalem from the countryside and serve at the temple for two one-week periods every year. Elizabeth also came from a line of priests. She was a descendant of Aaron. Not only did this couple come from significant and religious families, we are told they were both righteous in the sight of God and kept all his commands. Now, this didn't mean they were perfect. In a moment we're going to see how Zechariah struggled with doubt. But, like we've been studying in the book of Romans, this means they were righteous because of their faith. They were examples of genuine faith.

This is really important because of the next thing Luke tells us—they had no children. They were both old and long past the age of child bearing. In those days to be without a child was an absolute tragedy. It's how a woman found her place in society. To make matters worse, most people in that culture and time would have believed that God was punishing them because of some hidden sin in their lives. So Elizabeth was forced to walk through life with this shame, with an invisible sign hanging around her neck that read, "sinner." And you don't want to go to church sometimes? Wow, think how she felt!

Although Zechariah didn't have to deal with the same shame, he had to struggle through the disappointment of having no child to carry on the family name. It was such a tragedy that many men in that day divorced their wife and moved on to another woman. This is why Luke is so careful to make it clear—they were righteous in God's sight. Now, it's true that sin sometimes has consequences that are both horrible and humiliating. But it's also true that bad things happen to good and godly people. That's just a fact of life.

Some of you know exactly how they felt though. You have dealt with or are dealing with a major disappointment in your life. Maybe like Elizabeth and Zechariah, you're trying to have children but you can't. Maybe you are single and desperately want to be married but you're not. Maybe you are married but the marriage hasn't turned out to be all that you thought it would be. Or maybe you are dealing with a chronic illness or medical issue. If you are a follower of Jesus, I bet you have prayed and prayed and prayed but God doesn't seem to answer. Some of you have even stopped praying because you're discouraged.

In just the past three weeks, I've done two tough funerals. One for a buddy of mine from high school whose father suddenly died of a heart attack digging a ditch at work. The other for a couple in our church who lost their baby to a miscarriage late in the pregnancy. The first family doesn't know the Lord. My high school friend is angry and doesn't believe there is a God because how could he be so cruel. The second family know the Lord and have showed incredible faith in the midst of deep heartache and pain. They've been trying for a long time to start a family and it just hasn't happened. That's what life does to us. It does that even to good people, people who are trying to follow the Lord.

God Chose to Bless Elizabeth and Zechariah in His Timing

At least for Zechariah he had his work. Luke tells us in verses 8-10 that while Zechariah was doing his priestly duties in Jerusalem, he was chosen by lot to enter the Holy Place in the temple and burn incense. You need to know that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for him. With so many priests, many would never get the opportunity. And if you were chosen, it meant that God personally chose you to come into his presence and represent his

people. Zechariah, who no doubt would be thrilled, entered the Holy Place, burned incense and offered up prayers. Meanwhile, the rest of the priests were outside praying and waiting for him to come out. But, on this day, Zechariah didn't come out for a long time. Look at verses 11-14:

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 was 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 call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,...

You need to know that God hasn't spoken to humanity since the prophet Micah. No word from God. No prophet. Nothing. Just silence. Now, after 400 years, God breaks into human history and speaks to Zechariah through the angel Gabriel. We like to think it would be so cool to talk with a sweet little angel. But Zechariah was terrified! I'm not sure why, but this angel sure didn't look like one of Victoria's Secret angels! Thankfully Gabriel had great news for fearful Zechariah. Elizabeth would give birth to a son, whom they were to name John, and he will be a joy and delight to them and to many others as well. John would pave the way for the Lord in the spirit and power of the Old Testament prophet Elijah. And you thought your kid was special!

Did you notice what else the angel said to Zechariah? He says, "your prayer has been heard." What prayer is the angel talking about? I didn't read about any specific prayer. He must be talking about Zechariah's prayer for a son, which I would imagine, at age 60, he likely stopped praying a long time ago. But maybe not? Maybe Zechariah did still pray for a son? We don't know. What we do know is God hadn't forgotten that prayer. God remembered the deepest longing of their hearts. And while it took God a long time to answer the prayer, we as followers of Jesus have to trust that his timing is always perfect. It's no coincidence that Zechariah's name means, "God remembers."

What is it that you want more than anything for God to remember? What prayer have you stopped praying because deep down you don't think God cares anymore. This story reminds us that God's ways are not our ways. God's plans are most often much different from ours. And God's timing rarely ever lines up with ours. And you know what, God didn't owe Zechariah and Elizabeth anything. Yet, in his sovereign grace he chose to bless them. And the blessing went way beyond them and what they had hoped for. Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed for a son. What they got was a prophet. God not only blessed them with a child, he also was unfolding his plan to bring salvation to all people. God didn't just send a Savior, he sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for him.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had Prepared Differently for the Blessing

If you think all this would have been a lot to take in for Zechariah, you are right. Let's face it, God was working in an out-of-box sort of way. It was hard for Zechariah to believe it. Look at what happens next in verses 18–20:

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

Zechariah wanted a sign. He wanted proof that God would come through on his promise. What he got was not the sign he was hoping for. What he got was silence. So, Zechariah was left in the temple with nothing left to say. Meanwhile, the other priests are outside wondering if he had a heart attack inside. When Zechariah finally does come out, he can't say a word! Can you imagine trying to describe what just happened when you can't even speak? It must of been like an ancient game of Pictionary. "Flapping wings...eagle? No, wait, angel...Sounds like...dog...wait, God..." Finally, he finishes his priestly duties and goes home.

Let's pick up the story in verses 23–25:

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "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."

I wonder what it must have been like for Zechariah to come home to his wife and he can't speak at all.

Zechariah and Elizabeth represent two different kinds of righteous people. You could say they represent two different kinds of Christians. Zechariah was an amazing and God-fearing man. He served the Lord in the temple. He remained faithful to his wife and did all this well into his old age. Yet, in a critical moment, he doubted the angel's word. Sometimes even good and godly people have doubts about God's promise. Have you ever underestimated God? I sure have. I put God into a nice little box of my own making all the time. And so have you. But, God didn't punish him for his doubt. Yes, it was a severe thing to doubt and underestimate God. But, I think making him mute was actually an act of God's mercy and grace. Zechariah would have to spend the next nine months quietly watching God work out his plan. He wouldn't be able to brag or boast to his family and friends. Instead Zechariah spent the time silently contemplated and preparing for the birth of the forerunner to the Messiah.

Zechariah is an example of a person who has known the Lord for a long time. He goes to church. He drops some money in the offering. He leads a community group. He goes off on mission trips. He prays before meals. He reads his Bible consistently. He does all the right things in all the right places in all the right ways. But, when God comes along and challenges him to a new level of faith, he's not ready. For some of you, in order to prepare for Christmas, you'll need to turn off the cruise control of your faith and allow God to throw you into city-like traffic.

On the other hand, think about Elizabeth. She is a righteous saint of a woman who takes her burden to God. Instead of being silenced because of doubt, she chose to remain in seclusion for five months. We really don't know why she did that but I think it was a deliberate choice she made. Out in the wilderness alone, I bet she rejoiced and praised God every day as she watched her belly grow. When we do hear her speak she says, "The Lord has done this for me...he's taken away my disgrace." Elizabeth doesn't act like a victim who has been bitter at God. Instead she served God faithfully for years. And when her disgrace is removed, she gives God the glory. She seems so much better prepared than Zechariah was to believe and receive God's gift.

To be prepared for the coming of Christ, Zechariah and Elizabeth both needed silence and solitude. So, I want to encourage you to take some time every day this month to be alone with God. Silence is not just being quiet; it's actively listening to God. We do that in his Word, the Bible. Solitude is not just the absence of people; it's purposely being in the presence of God. For us living in the San Francisco Bay Area, we have to work hard at this. If we are going to be quiet and if we are going to be alone, we have to plan for it. If you have the YouVersion App, there are dozens of Advent reading plans available to use. In our lobby, on our website and on our Facebook page, there is an Advent guide we put together as well. If we don't take the time to practice both silence and solitude and allow them to draw us into a greater awareness of God's gift in Jesus, then we will never be prepared for Christmas.

This couple reminds me that it really doesn't matter how long you've known God, or how well you've obeyed God, or how faithfully you've served God, there is always room for growth. God is committed to stretching and growing the faith of his people like Zechariah and Elizabeth.

If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, you need to know that God never promises you a life free from suffering and disappointment. And sometimes you'll never know the "why" answer to those life-altering events, whether it be the loss of a child, a financial collapse, an unfortunate accident, or dealing with a struggling child.

I hate when people say, "Everything happens for a reason." That's just not true. Some things have no reason. We live in a broken and fallen world. The main issue, if you are Christian or not, is how we handle whatever comes our way. Some will become bitter, angry, and frustrated and the joy of life will be sapped away. Others will trust in the Lord and believe he is working even in their pain and waiting. They will trust that God can work out all things for our good. For example, how many childless couples have made a life out of ministering to other children either in the church or by adopting a child who no longer had parents who could raise them? In God's economy, sometimes a roadblock is not a dead end but a fresh new turn in the road. God's timing is often much different than ours, but do you trust that he is infinitely wiser?

So, are you prepared for Christmas? How we prepare really is a window into what really matters in our hearts. Do you believe God can step into your life and answer long-forgotten prayers in out-of-the-box ways? Do you believe God is always working in our waiting? Do you believe that the Creator of the universe knows what he is doing? Do you believe that Jesus came to take away your disgrace and shame? That's why he came. Let's make sure we are prepared to receive him this Christmas.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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