



The Christmas season is filled with feelings of anticipation and adults working to be prepared and everybody waiting. We're waiting to see family who live in different states; we're waiting to give or receive that special gift; some wait for the season to be done so life can go back to normal. If there's any image that summarizes Christmas for me it's that of tiny children staring with wonder at their presents under the tree. They're wondering what special delight is hidden inside and waiting to tear the paper off.

I watched some videos this past week of my kids opening gifts. There was squealing, jumping up and down, and shouts of celebration. Such good memories! As we grow older, some people lose that eager anticipation. Instead, mature adults are thinking of the "to do" list. Eager anticipation is replaced with grown up responsibility. This brings anxiety and business with it.

That's why it's so important for us to prepare our hearts for Christmas during this Advent season. Is it possible to regain some of that child-like breathless anticipation? What attitude would Jesus want us to have during this season?

Our next four worship services have been designed to prepare our hearts for celebrating the birth of Jesus. Each week we'll be asking ourselves the question, Who's at the center of my Christmas? It's our prayer that the singing, the dramas and the sermons will help you experience this season in a way that honors Jesus: with him at the center of your heart.

Today, as we look at the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth in Luke 1, we'll contrast the experiences of putting doubt or hopeful anticipation at the center of our Christmas.

Here's the setting: God hasn't spoken to humanity for 400 years. He was silent. No prophets. No angelic visits. Humanity was left to wait for God to step into creation once again. When God determined the wait was over and it was time to do a miracle again he gave the angel Gabriel the nod. First Gabriel visited Zechariah, then Mary, then the shepherds. He brought a message that forever changed humanity—the waiting for the Messiah is finally over; He is coming.

In our verses today we're introduced to Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Their child, John the Baptist, was conceived miraculously and he was appointed to prepare the people of Israel for Jesus' ministry.

**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 (verses 5–7).**

The most provocative characteristic of this couple is being **both** "righteous in the sight of God" while being childless. Being "righteous in the sight of God" simply meant they were an example of genuine faith in God. As we've been learning in Romans, being "blameless" doesn't mean they were sinless. Everyone is tainted with sin as Romans 3:23 tells us that, "*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" Yet this couple, like Abraham, must have had a faith that God would provide the righteousness they were unable to earn on their own.

And they maintained this faithfulness to God, despite a deep disappointment. They didn't have any children and they were "very old." Elizabeth was past menopause. Her chances of having a child, according to natural means, was zero. It was impossible.

In those days, people mistakenly believed that to be barren was a sign of a spiritual defect in the wife. They didn't have fertility specialists. They simply believed God closed a woman's womb because he held some grudge against her. As a result, a barren woman lived with shame, disgrace and disappointment.

Zechariah lived with a wife whose heart was heavy with deep disappointment and pain. And he had his own deep disappointments to deal with too. He had no sons to carry on his name. He had no one to pass his faith to. But in Elizabeth's case this could hardly be a curse from God, since verse 5 tells us she was righteous. Instead, there had to be some other reason. Perhaps, like Sarah (Genesis 18:11) and Hannah (1 Samuel 1-2) she remained barren because God had a greater plan for her.

Her barren state would heighten the sense that her impending pregnancy was a miracle. As much as it goes against our desires for security and comfort, God needs us to face impossible situations before we can see his miracles.

Having established the credentials of the elderly couple, Luke now describes the first dramatic event. Verse 9 tells us that Zechariah was chosen by lot to go into the temple and burn incense. One priest was chosen out of about 8,000 to perform this special task, One special time in his life. Zechariah was chosen!

As Zechariah was alone in the temple burning the incense, a second dramatic event occurs.

**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" (verses 11–14).**

What a crazy, terrifying and wonderful experience! First, Zechariah is gripped with fear. Then he's told that he and his wife will experience a miracle: the single greatest area of pain and shame in their life is going to be reversed. They're going to have a son!

We shouldn't rush past this revelation. Naturally it's impossible. Logically it's illogical, beyond human expectation. God is about to pull his specialty—he's going to do the impossible. Prayers that Zechariah lifted to God during the earlier years of his life, are now going to be answered. Prayers that Zechariah most likely had stopped praying, are now going to be answered.

In verses 15–17 the angel explains that this son will be very special. We know him as John the Baptist. As an adult he preached a message of repentance to the people of Israel in order to prepare everyone for the miracles and teaching of Jesus. Jesus the Messiah was finally going to come to earth. And Zechariah and Elizabeth's son will be a herald to his coming.

This is probably beyond the wildest dreams and prayers of Zechariah. This is so out of the box that Zechariah can't believe it. Look at his reply to the angel in verse 18,

**"How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."**

I like how he says, "I'm an old man and my wife is well along in years." That's a tactful way of putting it. That's a smart man! But this angel didn't like the doubt this question revealed.

**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" (verses 19–20).**

I love Gabriel's logic. After he gives his name he gives one qualification to substantiate his statement that the impossible is going to happen. He says, "I stand in the presence of God."

In this short phrase he's saying, "I stand in the presence of the God ...who spoke creation into being, who brought the dead to life, who can melt the hardest heart with one drop of grace, who

holds the universe together with beautiful design but can draw outside of that design any time he chooses."

Think about it this way: No hardship is ever further away from a miracle than one word from God. Based on Gabriel's response to Zechariah's doubt, God and his angels want people to live with this anticipation of a miracle.

**Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 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. When his time of service was completed, he returned home (verses 21–23).**

The third dramatic event is a humorous one! Zechariah returns home and he has to communicate with Elizabeth that she's going to become pregnant but he can't speak. Can you imagine that first night home as they're getting ready for bed, Zechariah has that look in his eye. She hadn't seen that look in a long time! She might have been thinking, "you've got to be kidding!" Scripture spares us the details and simply tells us,

**After this (after he returned home) 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" (verses 24–25).**

We're not told much about Elizabeth here. Did she ever share any of Zechariah's doubts? Did she retreat for five months because she was so stunned by this turn of events? Did she always anticipate that she'd have a child one day? We don't really know. All we know is that she said "the Lord has done this for me" and then went into seclusion for five months.

As she felt John growing in her womb during these five months I think she was experiencing a shift in her heart. Verse 25 talks about favor upon her and disgrace taken away from her. I speculate that she had moments during those five months where she dropped memories of disappointment and shame like heavy stones. A person doesn't just wipe away a life-time of shame and disgrace in a moment. Her fears were replaced with courage. Her disgrace was replaced with dignity. Her shame was exchanged with the gracious favor of God. So she could say, "In these days he has shown his favor to me and taken away my disgrace."

How does this story instruct our approach to Christmas this season? We can have hope in the all-powerful Jesus both today and in eternity. As we place our hope in Jesus for today, we refuse to allow despair and doubt to occupy our hearts. As we place our hope in Jesus for eternity, we set our minds on the second coming of Jesus. Let me talk about today and eternity separately.

## Today

Are you facing a circumstance right now that's frustrating or exhausting or heart breaking? Of course you are. That's life. We can relate to Elizabeth and Zechariah. We know shame and disappointment too. Maybe some failure from your past. It could be an addiction you battle every day. Maybe your child hasn't turned out the way you envisioned. Maybe you're divorced, bankrupt, your marriage is a mess. Any one of these can dominate our minds and our hearts. They follow us like a gray cloud. It's no surprise then that people lose their child-like breathless anticipation for a miracle. Through facing the hardships of life, we grow beyond such naiveté. We're more mature now.

Are you allowing your disappointments to plant seeds of doubt and discouragement in your heart, or are you placing your hope in the all-powerful Jesus to do a miracle? Are you anticipating the miracle?

When we place Jesus at the center of our Christmas instead of our doubts, we set our minds on the possibilities instead of the hardships. What could the all-powerful Jesus do with the frustrations and the heart-breaking thing in your life? He could bring a miracle.

When we place limits on what can be accomplished by visible human resources, we're allowing worldliness to creep into our hearts. When we allow past failures and negative experiences to dominate our expectations of the now, we're doing the same.

Author and pastor Jack Miller wrote that when Christians do this, "At bottom, this is unbelief based on a secularized ignorance of the Spirit's power – His ability to supply us with God's goals for our lives and the supernatural means to reach them." The lesson from Zechariah and Elizabeth is to hold on to hope in the all-powerful Jesus.

Preparing for this sermon has stretched my heart and renewed my anticipation of a miracle. I'm reminded of how God did a miracle for my family five years ago. As we were looking for a place to live, we were so discouraged. All of the places were pretty bad and really expensive. I was checking Craigslist hourly for new options and Cassie and I were praying constantly. We didn't know what was going to happen. But we were placing our hope in God's power to do whatever he wanted! God could do a miracle.

As we were driving out of town battling discouragement we drove past a house that had been listed then removed from Craigslist. It was \$1500 cheaper than other houses we'd rejected so we figured the place was a dive. But it wasn't! It's the house we live in now and it's nice. In order for God to give it to us, the landlord rejected a request from one tenant for a new stove and then the realtor, a stranger to us, jumped us to the top of the wait list. Boom! Miracle! I know it's not as dramatic as "very old" Elizabeth getting pregnant, but it's a big miracle to me and my family.

What if God did a miracle for you in your impossible situation? What would it look like for you to have a shift in your heart to anticipate the miracle? This is the perspective God wants us to have through this Advent season **today**. It can dramatically affect your Christmas season.

But let's be completely realistic. Can we keep it real? As much as I believe that God will do miracles, some of us are going to live our entire lives with a hardship that won't go away. So while we're instructed to live continually with the hope of the miracle, some of us will die without seeing it resolved. God never promises us that he's going to miraculously change everything now. This is why it's vital for the Christian to think beyond today to eternity.

## Eternity

Let me talk about how we can have hope in the all-powerful Jesus in eternity. As we place our hope in Jesus for eternity, we set our mind on the second coming of Jesus. The Christian can confidently place their hope on his second coming because he's already demonstrated that he always keeps his promises and he said he'll return. When he returns Revelation 21:4 tells us that, "**He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.**"

In eternity, every follower of Jesus Christ experiences the miracle of never again being plagued with pain or disappointment or doubts. We are totally free from these pedestrian entanglements. This is a core distinction of the Christian faith. One of the reasons we endure pain and suffering is because we look forward to heaven where it will all be gone. Just listen sometimes to the words of the old spirituals: *Soon and Very Soon We Are Going to See The King* reminds us that we are destined for another place. *Going Up Yonder* reminds us that we can manage no matter what problem we face.

During this Christmas season I'm reading Thomas Kinkadee's Advent devotional. I'd like to read to you part of Day 2.

"When I remember this (waiting with expectation), I realize that the Advent message of waiting on tiptoe is even more important. It ties in with the scriptures that remind us to watch and wait always, because we just don't know when the next events are going to unfold. And it reminds us that this is something to wait for not with fear and dread, but with careful preparation and eager anticipation.

"The scriptures tell us this over and over again: Wait! There's more. Keep your eyes open. It could happen at any moment!

"Like little children at Christmas, we don't exactly understand the timetable, and that makes some of us a little edgy. But there's nothing really wrong with that. We're not supposed to be blasé

or complacent about the coming of Christ – either at Christmas or at the end of the age.

“Even as we throw ourselves into all the “to dos” of getting ready for Christmas, all the responsibilities of our daily lives and the extra responsibilities of the season, a part of us needs to be waiting for our Lord with eyes wide open, watching for the big moment.

“Waiting to celebrate that His kingdom has come on earth.

Waiting to renew our understanding of His coming in our lives.

Waiting for His final coming again in glory.

Waiting on tiptoe – like a little kid waiting for 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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