

Luke 1:5-13, 18-20
Can It Be?
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Well if you hadn't already noticed, this is a season for invitations. We've all received the invitation to get in on the Cyber Monday deals—nearly impossible to avoid receiving that one. Maybe you've received an invitation to a Christmas Party or two, or a kids Christmas Pageant. The most memorable invitation we ever received came a few years ago. It showed up in our mail box in an envelope with no return address...interesting, but not out of the ordinary. Inside was a generic invitation to a party at "our house," only we didn't know who "our" was, and there was no identifying address telling us where "our house" was located. We had no idea who or what we were being invited to. Hopefully someone at least someone showed up.

Invitations welcome us into an experience, this is one of the quintessential values of the millennial generation—a high value on the *experience*. This morning I want to invite you to a different experience, it's the journey, not of lights and festive music, but quiet anticipation. This is Advent. Advent is an exercise of delayed gratification, which is not a high value of this generation. Advent is an invitation to patiently waiting and reflectively anticipating what God is doing in our lives.

Unlike the prevailing culture that is so quick to proffer an answer, I'd like to suggest that a meaningful experience of Advent begins not in a manger with a postnatal mother gently rocking the new born Messiah and Savior of the world. It begins much earlier than that, and not with an answer, but with a question. For the next four weeks we will look at what we should expect as we are anticipating Jesus arrival into our lives this year. And it begins with priest named Zechariah who asks "Can it be?"

So out of reverence for the Word of God, I invite you to stand with me (as you are able) and listen to God's Word from Luke 1 beginning at verse 5.

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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's Gospel begins by introducing us to a couple with quite the pedigree. Zechariah and Elizabeth are both from the Priestly class, both descendants of the great priest Aaron, brother of Moses. Not only that, but when we meet them in this story Zechariah and Elizabeth are described as living blamelessly before the Lord. And yet despite everything they've got going for them, something is missing.

Prestigious job, right family, winning smile, doesn't matter. There is something else that looms in their lives that casts a dark shadow over their whole experience. Verse 7 cues us in by saying that Elizabeth was "barren." Verse 25 will later state that to be childless in this day was to endure disgrace in the eyes of those around you. **Literally, being without a child in this community meant that one was outside of the realm and reach of God's grace.**

I wonder if that is an experience anyone has felt? To feel outside of God's embrace because of a circumstance of your life, something that should come so naturally. Maybe it was an extended time without a job, or a time in which you didn't really know what job you should pursue. Maybe it was a time where you know you longed for a relationship, but no one was getting in line. Or maybe you, like many have endured the longing for a family with children that seemed like it would never come. These are the very real and timeless yearnings of life, and we know them.

So, we can only assume that Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed and prayed, from their youth they prayed, throughout their marriage, they prayed. Each and every time Zechariah led the people in worship, taking in their prayers, lighting the incense and then watching it each rise up to the heavens and out of sight, he was watching his own prayers, his own longing for a child would rise and disappear like the rest. As priest of the people, professionally what he longed for was a Messiah, but as a husband without posterity Zechariah longed for a son.

The culture in which we live is one that become increasingly cynical. We are quick to condemn or disregard the thoughts and actions of others without taking the time to understand their perspective. We are quick to flippantly write-off God because the thing we hope will happen doesn't—at least not within our timeline. And so, we're tempted to stop coming to worship, we stop looking, we stop praying, because, after all, I want it now.

But I want to argue that this is why we need to double down on prayer, why we need to show up at worship, week in and week out. **What worship and the disciplines of the Christian life do is continue to renew these great hopes in our lives.** Author Jamie Smith calls worship and the weekly participation in these sacred liturgies, the narratives that form our lives in God's story. Without worship without the daily and weekly invitation to prayer, confession, absolution, we descend into the abyss of cynicism. Maybe that's what Zechariah, unconsciously did. Maybe Zechariah, like us, forgot that that's only half the story. God also answers prayers.

One day, while Zechariah was on duty, he has the great fortune of being chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary and offer incense. While inside an angel came to him and said "Zechariah, do not be afraid, your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John."

And I love John's response. Here he is inside the temple, everyone is outside, and the Angel Gabriel comes to him and gives him the answer to the prayer he's spent his entire adult life longing for and Zechariah says: **how do I know you're telling the truth?**

Umm, Zechariah, first of all I'm an angel and we're having this conversation; and secondly, I stand in the presence of God, who sent me to give you this news. Need any more convincing?

You know, I think we have a lot more of Zechariah in us than we realize. Early on in our lives we have high hopes and aspirations, some of which come true, others that linger in the unanswered file. So, we pray, and we continue to hope, but after a while instead of holding out hope that our prayers will get answered, we start to feel safer in our longings—our unanswered prayers. We get used to waiting and not getting the response we hope for that the idea that it would be answered begins to scare us. We get used to asking and not receiving, disgrace than mercy. We start to think that God cannot or will not intervene, so we'd better let go of our great big dreams and settle for small dreams and a little happiness along the way.

A middle-aged person who's been in a job he dislikes for so long, but thinks he's too old to start fresh. So, he gives up the hope of making a difference and settles for a comfortable life. Seems that we settle into this rut of just wanting things to be vaguely cheery, but nowhere in scripture does the God of grace break into the lives of those who have learned to just get a little happiness out of life. No, the angels only come to those who keep the deep yearnings of the soul alive.

The question of Advent is not, can you live with unanswered prayer? Of course we can, we've been distracting ourselves with amusement and comfort and all sorts of lesser things for years. The question of Advent is whether you still believe God can bring salvation into the tired longings buried deep in our hearts.

So, for this, Zechariah gets nine months of silence to think about it. And the ironic thing is that as priest, especially a priest who hits the lottery and gets to offer sacrifices inside the temple, when Zechariah emerges the one thing he and every priest in his position gets to do is offer a blessing to his people. To step out of the inner courts of the Temple onto the threshold and pronounce that great blessing his great great great Grandfather Aaron once spoke over the people: may the Lord bless you...

The lesson I think this text wants to teach us is that there is no blessing in giving up your belief in the God who intervenes. But thankfully God's grace is not limited by our doubts. It's just that it doesn't always show up when we expect or hope it to. It comes to us late enough to make it clear to us that God's mercy and goodness don't come to us because we ask for it, but because God is merciful and good. It arrives late enough to remind us that the true blessing is being near to and longing for God.

When their son was born Zechariah saw God's grace and his tongue was released after he wrote down the words: "The child's name is John," which means God is gracious.

Even though Luke begins this gospel by telling us about this tongue-tied priest, who is unable to bless the people, he ends it by telling of Jesus lifting up his hands to bless his followers, reminding us that Jesus always does what we cannot do. He believes where we cannot imagine. He saves those we cannot help. And Jesus blesses us as the God who is with us.

Come to us Emmanuel. Come as the answer to our prayers whether we realize it or not. Come to us as the salvation for the deepest longings of our souls.

Amen.