

We are beginning a series called "Picture Perfect Christmas." We all have images of what a "perfect" Christmas looks like — music, trees, gifts, and family. But those expectations can bring a lot of pressure. The reality is this season also brings its share of stress, busyness, conflict, and disappointment. As we pursue a perfect Christmas, we're reminded life isn't as perfect as we hoped. To the people of the first Christmas, the arrival of Jesus bridged the gap between what is and what could be. Amidst all the harsh realities of life, they experienced real hope, peace, joy, and love.

We start the series with Zechariah. His story is marked by something each of us still experience today: waiting. Life is filled with waiting. In a NY Times article, Alex Stone told the story of how executives at a Houston airport solved a cascade of passenger complaints about long wait times at baggage claim. They first decided to hire more baggage handlers, reducing wait times to an average of just eight minutes. But complaints persisted. This made no sense to the executives until they discovered, on average, that passengers took just one minute to walk to baggage claim, resulting in a hurry-up-and-wait situation. The walk time wasn't the problem; it was the remaining seven empty minutes of staring at the baggage carousel. So, they came up with a brilliant idea — they moved the arrival gates farther away from baggage claim. Passengers now had to walk much farther, but their bags were often waiting for them when they arrived. Problem solved. The complaints dropped.

What does this teach us? The length of our wait isn't nearly as important as what we're doing while we wait. Essentially, we tolerate "occupied time" (like walking to baggage claim) far better than "unoccupied time" (like standing at the baggage carousel). Give us something to do while we wait, and the wait becomes endurable.

This is important because much of our life is spent waiting. Of course, we wait in traffic; we wait in lines at the grocery store, we wait for a call or text. But the hardest kind waiting is for those important things. It might be a letter of acceptance to a university. It might be for a call back on that job you interviewed for. It might be for something to change in your marriage, or just that you might someday find the right person to marry. It might be to have a child, or for a child you have to come home. By the way, waiting and hope always go together. Hope is the very reason we're willing to wait because we believe whatever we're waiting for will come and it will be worth the wait.

As followers of Christ, we sometimes see this hope as waiting on God because we know it's something only He can accomplish. So, let me ask you, what are you hoping for? What are you waiting on God for?

So often, waiting feels like unoccupied time to us. We wait, but maybe something is happening while we wait. Maybe God is actually doing something while we wait? Maybe our waiting on God could be occupied time; even fruitful time.

Zechariah was no stranger to waiting and hoping. He shows us how waiting can be occupied time; fruitful time. His story is found in the first chapter of the gospel of Luke.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous but childless

Let's begin by reading verses five through seven.

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. 6Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. 7But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. Luke 1:5-7

Zechariah and Elizabeth were both descendants of Moses' brother Aaron, the first priest of Israel. There was never a question about what Zechariah would do when he came of age. He'd be a priest like his forefathers. It's not that he was a big deal. There were about 18,000 priests in Israel. Most of them worked small farms and were poor.

But this was an usual couple. In the sight of God, they were special. Luke said they were righteous in God's sight and kept his commandments. This doesn't mean they were without sin, but unlike many priests of that day, they took God's word seriously and tried to live it out in their everyday lives.

This is significant because of the other thing Luke said about them: they had no child. Elizabeth was unable to conceive. In those days, that was not just an unfortunate circumstance; it was reason to question the goodness of God in their lives. Zechariah and Elizabeth knew what it meant to wait, month after soul-crushing month. And now the days of hoping for a child were long over.

To make matters worse, in those days, to be childless was a sign of a spiritual defect in the wife. It was believed God closed a woman's womb because he held a grudge against her. A childless woman was a disgraced woman. A husband could even divorce his wife because of this. In essence, Elizabeth was forced to walk through life with a sign hung around her neck, which read "defective." And you think you don't want to go to church sometimes? Although Zechariah didn't have quite the same stigma to

endure, he still lived with the disappointment of no child to carry on the family name.

Many of us have something in our lives like this; something that's brought deep disappointment. Something we've waited and waited for, praying, hoping, and it just never came to be. It happens. It happens to people just like Zechariah and Elizabeth; people who love God; people who want to obey his Word; people he calls righteous. Life does that to us.

Zechariah meets the angel Gabriel in the Temple

At least for Zechariah there was his work. As a priest, he served in the temple at Jerusalem for two separate weeks a year. That was his duty, and he was a man who always did his duty. Believe me, it wasn't always fun. For two weeks he'd walk around smelling like smoke and iron, with spattered blood all over him. It was a messy job being a priest!

But during one of the week-long stints, something unusual happened.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. Luke 1:8-10

While he was doing his priestly service, he was chosen by lot to enter the Holy Place in the temple and burn incense. This was an honor that came once-in-a-lifetime. While he was inside the temple, casting incense on the altar and prostrating himself, the people were outside offering prayers and waiting for him to come out. But on this day Zechariah didn't come out for a long time. Look what happened.

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. vv. 11-13

We tend to read this like he had a visit from an old friend. But this was an angel! It scared him to death! The entertainment industry portrays angels about as scary as Mister Rogers, but that's clearly not the case here. This angel came with some startling good news: Elizabeth would give birth to a son!

I'm struck by how the angel puts this. He said, "Your prayer has been heard." What prayer? I didn't hear any prayer. Could he be talking about his prayer for a son, which I imagine as a senior citizen he stopped praying for years ago? I'll bet Zechariah had forgotten that prayer, but God hadn't. Or maybe the angel had in mind another prayer. As a good Priest, Zechariah would have prayed for Messiah to come, and through him, for his people to be delivered. Zechariah prayed, waited, and hoped for that, and perhaps now the wait was over.

But there's one thing the angel said which must have bothered him a bit. He said of this child, "...you are to call him John." In those days, a son was his father's honor. Tradition dictated the firstborn son would take his father's name. Perhaps Zechariah, so overwhelmed by what the angel went on to say, didn't allow that to register. I mean the angel went on to say that John would bring joy. He'd be filled with the Holy Spirit, and he'd minister in the spirit and power of the prophet Elijah. He'd bring many people back to God, and "...make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:14-17).

Have you ever been promised something beyond your wildest dreams; something so out-of-the-box you could hardly believe it? This was it for Zechariah. It's like getting all the Christmas presents you've ever received and ever will receive at once, literally dumped on you.

Zechariah's doubt resulted in him being silenced

But, not so fast! Zechariah may have been a righteous man, but he was also a practical man, and this didn't make any sense. So, he asked the angel,

"How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." v. 18

As if the angel didn't know he was an old man! In asking for a sign, Zechariah was basically challenging what he said. Imagine you go into the Holy of Holies and see an angel, and the angel tells you this, and then you say, "I need a sign." The angel is like, "Dude, I am the sign. I'm an angel. What more do you want?"

The angel responds,

"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." vv 19-20

The angel didn't like that. If an angel is scary, think about what a mad angel is like! And this is Gabriel — a famous angel. So not only do you have a mad angel, you have a famous mad angel. He said, "Don't you know who you're talking to? Don't you know where I've been hanging out?" And then he picks up his remote and pushes the mute button and says, "You want a sign? I'll give you a sign. You'll be silent until my promise is made good."

Zechariah was left in the temple — silenced. Meanwhile, the people outside were wondering if he had a heart attack in there. When he finally did come out, he was unable to speak. This was when he began to learn sign language.

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. v. 22

I can imagine Zechariah signing when he got home as well. Luke is modest in what he said happened. It just said,

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." vv 23-25

Forgive me, but I can't help but use my imagination. Think about it. Zechariah could not speak. He returned home to Elizabeth. The first night, as they were getting ready for bed, Zechariah had that look in his eye. She hadn't seen that look for a long time! She was thinking, "You've got to be kidding!" Then he started with the sign language again. Imagine him trying to communicate his intentions!

But, sure enough, the angel's words came true. Elizabeth was pregnant. He was going to be a dad! But all Zechariah could do was sit in silence and wait. No whispering to the baby in Elizabeth's growing belly. No telling his neighbors about the son he'd been waiting for his whole life.

I've thought a lot about this silence. Until recently, I always thought of it as his punishment, like a mom tells her back-talking child to be quiet, maybe give him a time-out. But I've come to see this silence as a gift. It gave him time to think, time to ponder the words Gabriel had delivered, time to repent over his own unbelief, time to think about his son's mission to make ready a people prepared for the Lord, and time to reflect on whether he was ready. This would not be unoccupied time, but occupied time.

Elizabeth gave birth, and they named to boy John

And that fruitful silence continued through the waiting of those nine months. Finally, the big day came.

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. vv. 57-58

News spread around the neighborhood, and everyone rejoiced for Elizabeth. But where was Zechariah?

We don't meet up with him again until eight days later. When a son was eight days old, they'd circumcise him and announce his name. All the aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews waited for his parents to formally announce him as little "Zechariah," you know, a "chip off the old block." But look what happened.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name." vv 59-61

Perhaps they thought Elizabeth was taking advantage of her husband's silence. So, they turn to Zechariah.

Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment

he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him. vv. 62-66

I don't know why they made signs to Zechariah. I mean he might have been mute, but he wasn't deaf! But he wrote the name *lōannēs*, which means, "God is gracious." That settled it. As soon as Zechariah wrote the words, he began to speak, and his first words were words of praise and worship.

Our waiting can become fruitful through silence

Earlier, I asked the question, "How can our waiting become fruitful?" How can we make waiting occupied rather than unoccupied time? I believe this story gives us an answer. In this story, the answer begins with silence, because, if we embrace it, silence can bear the fruit of three things: faith, obedience, and worship.

Faith

First, silent waiting bears the fruit of faith. I mean here's Zechariah who was a righteous man and a priest who knew and served God. But he gave up hope that God would answer his long-forgotten prayers for a son. Then God sent Gabriel to him and made a marvelous promise. What did he do? He doubted God. He underestimated God. The angel said it flat out: "you did not believe my words." We don't always think of that as a big issue, but it is. Underestimating God is just as serious as rebelling against God.

I think many of us are like Zechariah. We just do what we're supposed to do, going through the motions, never really believing God is at work in our lives to accomplish all that he's promised; to bless us in ways we never thought possible. How about you? Do you believe God is able to step into your life and bring joy and blessing where there's been disgrace and disappointment? That's what the advent of Jesus really means. Listen again to Elizabeth's words: "He's shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people" (v. 25). Do you believe that? You may believe God could do that for someone else, but not for you. Maybe you think, "You don't know what I've done. You don't know how hopeless my situation is." Some of us have become so cynical and jaded; we no longer believe God is at work to bless us.

Mother Teresa once said, "The fruit of Silence is prayer. The fruit of Prayer is faith." For Zechariah, it was nine months of silence. It was only when that time was over, he could say, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them" (verse 68). That was a statement of faith, and that faith was the fruit of silence.

Obedience

But that's not all. Silent waiting also bears the fruit of obedience. I believe without this forced silence, Zechariah wouldn't have surrendered his right to name his son after himself. He had nine

months to think about that. “John, why John? Don’t I even have the right to name my son? Will God deprive me of that honor?”

But, somehow, nine months of silence bore the fruit of obedience: Zechariah declared, “His name is John.” It’s like, “He’s already been named. It’s not my prerogative. His name is John.” Obedience born from silence.

We see this same connection between silence and obedience in the life of Jesus. Before he began his ministry, he spent forty days alone in the wilderness, fasting. And then the devil showed up. But silence and solitude prepared Jesus to withstand his temptations, to remain obedient. If the fruit of silence is prayer, and the fruit of prayer is faith, then the fruit of faith is obedience.

I had plenty of time for silence on my sabbatical. We covered over 7,000 miles and 16 states in our car. We prayed together, read to each other, listened to music, and we had lots of time to be quiet and think. I thought about areas in my life in which God is calling me to obedience. It hit me how being a pastor is spiritually hazardous to your health. I mean as a pastor, I’m constantly doing “spiritual” things, and it’s so easy to confuse those things with actually being obedient. I’m constantly reading and studying the Bible to prepare for messages, but that doesn’t mean I’m reading the Bible for my own soul, or letting it impact my own life. I’m constantly asked to pray at meetings and meals as part of my job, but that doesn’t mean I’m leading a life of personal prayer. A team of us get together every week and plan our worship services, but that doesn’t mean we’re worshipping.

It’s an easy deception. It’s like golf. I started playing golf again during my sabbatical. I bought a new set of clubs and a bag. I started reading golf tips and watching videos on the internet. I found an 18-hole course I could play in Kentucky for \$20.00. Initially, I made great strides. My score went from 120 to 100, then into the 90s. Then I’d play the back nine!

But here’s the deal: it would be easy to deceive myself about the state of my game. Why? Because entering into the golf world is easy. I can read golf blogs, buy golf equipment, wear cool golf shirts, watch the pros play on TV, enjoy eating at the clubhouse — and feel like I’m a decent golfer! But I’m not. Just being exposed to something doesn’t mean you’re proficient at it. It’s the same way with our spiritual lives.

So, the fruit of my Sabbatical silence is I’m playing more golf (Ha!). No, not really! The fruit of my silence is I’m committed to becoming more obedient and proficient at letting scripture speak to my soul and impact my life, and spending more time alone in prayer and worship.

Worship

That leads to the last thing: silent waiting also bears the fruit of worship. I believe without that forced silence Zechariah would not have praised and worshipped with such depth and passion.

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

In fact, down in verses 68-79, he sang a song. These nine months of silence brought about a fresh state of spiritual health in the life of Zechariah because the immediate thing that came out of his mouth was a torrent of praise. He couldn’t contain himself. He was exuberant. Nine months of being quiet, nine months of listening, nine months of paying attention to God in his heart—it finally began to dawn on him that God’s plan was coming to fruition, and the miracle of his son would be part of the preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

I can just see Zechariah, at the end of his song, bend down and get nose to nose to his little boy and say,

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.” vv. 76-79

These were the words of a man who had time to think.

What is worship? Worship is our God-glorifying response to who God is and what he’s done for us. Worship doesn’t happen in a vacuum. It doesn’t happen just because the music is good, or the building is beautiful, or we’re in a good mood. It happens because we see something, even just a glimpse of who God is and what he’s done for us. To respond to God like that is the most important and the most satisfying thing we’ll ever do.

A few of months ago, we shared a new vision for this church. We believe God is calling us to bring transformation to this spiritually dark place in which we live. But that will only happen as we ourselves are being transformed by the living God. And one of the ways we’re transformed is through worship.

I want to encourage you this Advent to steal away moments of silence from the noise, activity, busyness, and distractions of this season to be alone and quiet before God. Wait on him and let that waiting become occupied time, fruitful time. It’s like being at a play. When one act is over, the director and stagehands take time to rearrange the set for the next act. The curtain closes, and you sit quietly for a few minutes while those behind the curtain move sets, rearrange props, and get ready for the next scene.

Take some time and sit quietly while God works behind the scenes of history and of your life. And let your silence bear the fruit of faith, obedience, and worship.

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