

ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH (The Cast of Christmas - 2020)

Luke 1:5-25 - December 13, 2020 - Immanuel - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

A young rookie was attending his first Comedian's Convention. He was very excited to see all the comic's he'd seen on TV sitting at tables all around him. The proceedings begin with a joke session. A veteran comic got up and said *"Number 64."* Everyone in the hall laughed loudly, except this rookie. He turned to the older comedian who brought him, and said, *"I didn't hear any joke. What's everybody laughing about?"* His friend replied, *"These are all professional comedians, they don't need to hear the jokes. They know them so well, they've given every joke a number. They just get up and say the number. It saves time."* Next another veteran got up and said, *"Number one hundred forty three,"* and again, everyone in the room cracked up. *"Could I try it?"* Jimmy asked his friend. *"Of course,"* the friend said. So this rookie stood up and said, *"Number fifteen."* Nobody laughed. He was so embarrassed he just sat down. Then he heard a voice from near the end of his table, *"Some people just don't know how to tell a joke."* [I know. I'm one of those people! Actually I just need better material!]

It's hard to laugh at the same old jokes, or to be enthralled with the same old stories. It is often said that familiarity breeds contempt, but I think most of the time it breeds indifference. When we become overly familiar with something, we can become apathetic about it.

One of the challenges every Christmas is that most of us have heard the story of Christmas so often that our brains go into neutral whenever the story begins. However, each year we need to try to see this story from a different angle; to really see the great truths in a fresh way.

This Advent season we are looking at the Cast of Christmas - the well-known characters at the center of the story. The people in the first Christmas story are so familiar to us that sometimes we can't imagine who they were *"before they became famous."* If we were casting for a pageant that would change the world, we probably wouldn't choose these characters. If you look closely, most of these people were broken, discarded, or marginalized. That means God's greatest miracle came into the world through the lives of highly unlikely, and even broken people - people, quite frankly, just like you and me. I think there is a lesson in that for us.

Pastor Ray McKelvy says, *"God uses the unlikely to accomplish the impossible."* I agree.

I like the way "The Message" paraphrases 1 Corinthians 26:26-29,

"Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of the "brightest and the best" among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these "nobodies" to expose the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies"?"

God chooses unlikely people to accomplish his purposes and His power is shown to be perfect through our weakness. Then, when amazing things happen people ask, *"How in the world are they able to do that?"* and the best conclusion is, *"It must be God. Look at what God can do."* And that conclusion may draw them to faith in the One who can save and empower them too.

This morning we look at the story of an older couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth. The fact that they were older means they have already been marginalized a little.

However, the real pain in this couple was not their age; it was that they were childless. The most common word for this in biblical times was “barren.” To be “barren” in this context means being unable to conceive and give birth to your own child, but it means more than that.

I want to expand on the idea of barrenness to include each of us, for we all struggle with barren times and situations in life. Each of us knows something about brokenness and disappointment - meaningless and emptiness - fruitlessness and failure. Most of us know more about feeling barren as a result of enduring the events of 2020.

The word “barren” was used in several ways in the bible. It can refer to having no positive results or achievements due to your efforts or to be empty of meaning and value.

It is a word that always conjures images of brokenness and disappointment. In terms of land, the word “barren” meant unable to produce much or any vegetation. It can refer to land that is unfruitful, like an arid desert. Anyone familiar with the middle east knows that much of that land is barren - so much so that whenever life springs forth it is never taken for granted.

When Moses was leading the people through their wilderness, in a very barren place, the people were dying of thirst. Moses cried out to the Lord on behalf of the people and God told him to strike a rock and water would come forth in the desert. Moses did so and the people were saved and **they praised the God who can bring life out the most barren of places.**

Of all the kinds of barrenness one could experience, childlessness was perhaps the worst for biblical Jews. For Jews their greatest achievement in life was all about their legacy. It was about passing on their faith and culture. It was about preserving the land that God had given for the next generation. You couldn't do this without descendants. Consequently, a woman's worth was measured by how many children she had. **Barren** - it is a hopeless kind of word.

In spite of the heartache in their lives, Zechariah still had a job to do. He was a priest. The Priests served at the temple in teams on a rotating schedule. When your “team” was up, your role was determined by lot (like drawing names out of a hat). The top job was to offer the incense at the altar inside the temple. This was followed by a benediction you were privileged to give to the people following your service. If you were fortunate to be chosen for this job you could only be chosen once and many priests were never chosen for this honored duty.

Zechariah was very old and had never been selected. I suspect he had come to believe that he would end his career without any sense of accomplishment or purpose. His sense of barrenness was not as deep as his wife's, but it was surely there. **However, all that changed one day.**

Zechariah's team was set to serve and when the assignments were being given out, his name was finally pulled from the hat. He was joyful - but there was more to come. Once in the Temple the Angel of God appeared to Zechariah with the news that he and his wife were going to be parents (!) - and not just the parents of any ordinary child - their child would come to be known as John the Baptist - they would be parents of the forerunner to the Messiah.

Barrenness was replaced with blessing!

The reason we should find all of this interesting is because every one of us has some kind of barrenness in our lives. We all have some kind of brokenness or pain. Maybe it's...

- Childlessness, or alienation from the children you have and love so much
- Divorce or separation or just a passive aggressive truce in a cold relationship
- The loneliness and grief that comes after losing one you love
- A physical problem which makes you feel like a burden to others
- Being bullied or marginalized in some way
- Public Failure, or the debilitating fear that our private failure will become public
- Personal feelings of rejection or unworthiness
- Financial instability which makes it impossible to get ahead
- Rumors that destroy, doubts that discourage, or regrets that rob you of joy

I hope you get the idea. Everyone here has, or had, or will have (maybe all three) some kind of barrenness in their life. What can we learn from the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth?

First, You are Not Forgotten. Elizabeth and Zechariah certainly must have felt like God had either forgotten them, or didn't care about them. It is tempting in the time of pain to think that we're all alone - *but we are not!* I can't prove it, but I can testify. I can testify from the lives of Elizabeth and Zechariah, and from my own life, and from the lives of hundreds I have known.

We are never forgotten by God. We must be honest. It is difficult to look around and see people who seem to have the very things you want and lack. We wonder why God has overlooked us. We wonder what we've done wrong to be kept from these longed for blessings.

What we learn from this story is that just because we feel forgotten doesn't mean we are. In fact, every decoration you see in a store or in your home; every Christmas Sale flyer; every carol you sing; every gift you receive or buy, is a reminder that you are not forgotten.

Christmas is the story of God remembering and keeping His promise.

The nation of Israel had waited 400 years for the promised Messiah. It would have been easy to conclude that God had forgotten His people, but He did not. All along, God had a plan for good - a plan for blessing. Christmas is the fulfillment of God's promise to send the One who could save the world and mend all that is broken - including us. We may not see the big picture right now but we should be encouraged by the Christmas story.

Please note, sometimes God blesses you in unexpected ways. That means we don't always get what we ask for or what we've been waiting on - but God always blesses those who trust in Him. That blessing may come in this life, or sometimes in the next, but God is always working for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. We may not yet see God's advent - His coming - but that doesn't mean God isn't already well on His way to come to your rescue, to come to meet you at your point of need. You are not forgotten by God.

Second, God's plan for our lives often requires a training ground that is painful. Why? Because God is preparing us for eternity - for His glory. In our study of Hebrews we saw that Jesus "learned obedience through what He suffered." Moses wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. David was chased around the land for many years by King Saul. Abraham waited 25 years for the child that had been promised to him. The apostles endured hardships of various kinds. All of these things were part of God's training ground.

Our challenge in the times of barrenness, is to be open to the possibility that God is doing something in us now that is preparing us for the work He is going to do in us later. Think of it like the painful or boring classes we had to endure when we were in school. I studied accounting for two years in college and I hated every minute of it. When I decided to become a pastor, I thought that suffering was for nothing! But I found out I was wrong when I had to help lead a church. I have been grateful for that education almost every day since.

God often has to deepen our faith before He can use us as He desires. The trials of life deepen our root system. They teach us how to trust. There is an old poem by an anonymous author that reflects the way God often works in His people. It is entitled "*When God wants a Man.*" Of course these ideas apply to women as well as men - so this is relevant for all.

*When God wants to drill a man and thrill a man and skill a man...
 When God wants to mold a man to play the noblest part;
 When He yearns with all His heart to create so great and bold a man that all the world shall praise...
 Watch His methods; Watch His ways!
 How He ruthlessly perfects whom He royally elects... How He hammers him and hurts him,
 And with mighty blows converts him
 Into frail shapes of clay that only God understands.
 How his tortured heart is crying and he lifts beseeching hands...
 How he bends but never breaks when His good he undertakes.
 How He uses whom He chooses...and with every purpose fuses him; [and]
 By every art induces him to try His splendor out...
 God knows what He's about!*

The first time I heard this poem I hated it. The idea of God allowing and using my pain for His purpose was distasteful. But now I've come to realize that I have learned more, and grown more, from pain than I have from comfort. I have come to see hardship as a type of blessing. The hard and challenging times of life have resulted in the seasons of greatest fruitfulness.

Like a hammer to a nail, sometimes God pounds us (or allows a pounding) so we will go deeper and hold firm. The nail cannot understand what seems like unreasonable pressure, but what is happening is actually helping it to do what it was created to do. Likewise the trials of life help us to develop roots that enable us to stand strong in the storms and point up to God.

Third, we need to learn to WAIT ON GOD IN PRAYER during the barren times of life. A couple of week's ago, when Jacob preached, he said every sermon he heard growing up at Immanuel had three points - so he followed suit - but my third point has four sub-points ;~).

I want to draw on the experience of Zechariah to help us learn four ways and reasons to wait on God. **When we pray, we need to -**

1. Wait for God to answer in His Own Time. That means according to His schedule and His timetable. In other words - whenever God thinks it's best.

Zechariah was skeptical because He had waited so long for an answer that hadn't come. Even when an Angel came with a message he was doubtful. He said, "*How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.*" Basically, he said, "*We gave up on that prayer a long time ago,*" but they didn't realize God was still working in His time.

We must be willing to let God answer our prayers in His own time. "*The angel said to him, 'Don't be afraid Zechariah, your prayer has been heard.'*" (v. 13) The tense of the verb "heard" literally means it had already happened. You see God hears and answers our prayers immediately, but sometimes we have to wait to receive His answer, to see His plan unfold.

We must learn to wait on the Lord. That's a hard thing for most people in our microwave, drive-thru, throw-away, info-superhighway culture, but we need to learn how to wait.

The Apostle Paul tells us to be "*imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises [of God].*" (Heb 6:12) "*... who through faith and patience inherit the promises of God.*"

Why does God sometimes wait to reveal His answers to our prayers? I don't know for sure and I usually don't like it very much, but I've observed that many times God needs to prepare us for His answer, in other words, we're not ready, or something else needs to happen first.

Suppose your 10-year-old child comes to you and says, "Can I drive the car?" What would you say? If you're a good parent, you will say, "*Not yet. Someday I will let you when you're mature and have learned how to drive.*" The point is, you must wait until the child is ready.

Many times God waits for us to grow up in order to answer our prayer. Our frustration is that we think we're ready to receive all the answers while God is still waiting for us to mature.

What I know for sure is this - God's delays are not God's denials. Many times God answers our prayers with a “No” straight up. But “Not yet” does not mean “No,” it just means “not yet.” Unless we hear a clear “No” we need to wait for God to answer in His own time.

2. We also need to Wait for God to Answer in His Own Way. Not only whenever He thinks best but also however He thinks best. God's ways are always better and usually bigger than ours. In Isaiah 55:8-9, *God says, “My ways are not your ways.”* God often delays an answer to prayer is so He can answer in a way bigger than you thought originally.

What would have happened in this story if God had answered Elizabeth and Zechariah' request for a baby immediately? They would have had a little Jewish baby, and they would have loved him or her. They would have cherished that baby and it would have been great.

But God delayed granting this request for a number of years - until the birth of their child would closely precede the birth of Christ. When God answered He didn't just give them any ordinary baby, He gave them John the Baptist. He was the last prophet, and the only prophet able to see the prophecies about the Messiah / Christ being fulfilled. Jesus said, *“among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!”* (Mat 11:11)

Oftentimes our problem is this - we ask for too little and we want it too quick. Instead of letting God work in His own time, and in His own way.

3. We must Be Willing to Let God Answer in His Own Power. We must not ask God for something and then just try to work it out on our own or force His hand. We need to let God answer in His own power. There's an important truth in this story about Zechariah and Elizabeth. The fact is this: God often waits until the situation is humanly impossible so that when God acts you will be clear that it was God who made it happen.

When did God give Zechariah and Elizabeth a baby? Long after they were beyond childbearing years. They said, *“We're too old!”* They had given up. Then God answered.

The same thing happened to Sarah and Abraham. God came to Abraham and said, *“You're going to be the father of a great nation.”* Abraham said, *“That sounds good!”* Then he waited and waited until he was 86 years old. Still nothing. So he decided to help God out so he went and got Hagar, his wife's servant, and had a child by her, Ishmael. That child became the father of the Arab nations and Islam. Personally, I believe many of the lingering problems in the Middle east are the consequence of Abraham's impatience. He should have waited.

Finally God said, “That's not My plan! Let Me do it in My time, My way, and My power.” So finally when Abraham was ninety-nine, and his wife Sarah was ninety - an angel came to them and basically says, “the time is now” and their son Isaac was born.

The point is that God waited until it was humanly impossible, until they had given up, and thrown up their hands in surrender to God. That is when we see God act most clearly!

Do you want to have an answer from God? Wait for God to answer in His own time. Wait for God to answer in His own way. Wait for God to answer in His own power.

4. We need to Wait for God to Answer for His Own Purpose. So, not only whenever He wants and however He wants, but also for whatever reason He chooses.

Why did God answer Elizabeth and Zechariah' prayer for a son? Because He needed a John the Baptist to grow up in a Godly home. He had a special purpose for them and their son.

I think the best example of what I'm trying to say is found in the life of the Apostle Paul. In a letter Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, he told them that what he'd was praying for, *“One of the things I always pray for is the opportunity, God willing, to come at last to see you. ...I am eager to come to you in Rome, ... to preach God's Good News.”* (Rom 1:10, 15)

Did God ever say “Yes” to Paul's prayer about going to Rome? Yes, but notice how.

Acts 28:16 says, *“When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself with a soldier to guard him.”* **Paul finally went to Rome** - but under house arrest, under guard, waiting for a trial before Caesar, with a death sentence hanging over his head. Not exactly the opportunity to preach that he so desired, but Paul accepted the plan of God.

Paul wanted to go to Rome to preach - and he did some of that with small groups. But what was the main reason God wanted Paul in Rome? Not to preach, but **to write letters**.

While Paul was in Rome under house arrest, he had a lot of time on his hands. What did he do? He wrote a bunch of letters to different Christians all over the Mediterranean region. Those letters now make up much of what we call the New Testament Scriptures. Through those words Paul didn't just share the Gospel with a few thousand Romans - He has shared the Gospel with billions of people throughout history all around the world - including me and you.

As you're waiting on God in prayer, through whatever season of barrenness you're enduring, remember these words spoken by the Angel of the Lord to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. He said,

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy - the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” (Luke 1)

“For nothing will be impossible with God” - we need to wait, and we need to keep on praying, and we need to keep trusting in God, until we see and believe that what the angel said is true.