

The Gift of Certainty

Week 2

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The Promise of Hope

We celebrate Christmas at the darkest time of the year when the days are short, the nights are cold and the landscape outside our window appears barren and lifeless. Many of our Christmas traditions are about reminding us of a brighter, warmer, and more carefree time of year. We display Christmas trees with their evergreen branches, twinkling lights, and shiny tinsel, surrounding ourselves with color and light because it reminds us that despite the darkness, we have hope.

Though it is cold and lifeless now, we anticipate the return of sunshine and warmth. Every winter offers the hope of spring and a reminder that God brings life from barrenness. This week we'll focus on a story of hope — hope that God works even in silence and waiting, that he is faithful to his promises, and that he always finds a way.

Day 1

Before the birth of the Savior, another baby would be born. His miraculous arrival had also been prophesied and was part of God's incredible plan. He would be the one who would prepare the way for the Lord. He is John the Baptist, and our story begins with his father, Zechariah.

Read

Luke 1:5–7 (NIV)

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

Think About

The Christmas story is one of cosmic significance — God moving in spectacular and unexpected ways to make all things right. Yet, it is also a deeply human story of longing and fulfillment, struggle and joy, doubt and faith. In all his divine glory, God chooses to work through ordinary people. In a narrative only God could author, the story of the incarnation — of God bringing life and hope into the world — begins with an old, barren couple who'd given up on ever having a child.

Luke introduces us to this devout couple as people from priestly lines, deeply faithful, and “righteous before God.” Yet, despite their upright character, they carry a deep sorrow. They are childless in a culture where infertility was often seen as God’s curse. For years, they had likely endured the quiet pain of unfulfilled hopes and the whispers of those who wondered why God had withheld this blessing from them.

Yet, Luke assures us that their infertility was not a result of sin or judgment. Instead, God was preparing to bring about something miraculous, something in line with the great stories of the Old Testament. Like Abraham and Sarah, Samson’s parents, and Hannah, whose son Samuel would lead Israel, Zechariah and Elizabeth’s wait was a prelude to God’s grace and intervention. Their story is one of hope fulfilled, of God moving in what seems lifeless and barren to bring forth new life. Luke invites us to recognize that God’s plans often unfold in surprising ways, and prepares us for an even bigger miracle to come.

Reflect

For those of us who know what it is to feel the weight of unanswered prayers, Zechariah and Elizabeth’s story is a reminder that God’s silence is not absence. What are you asking God for during this Advent season?

Day 2

Before Jesus comes John the Baptist, the forerunner who will prepare the way. His birth is miraculous in its own way, and in the opening of Luke’s Gospel, we meet his father, Zechariah.

Read

Luke 1:8–10 (NIV)

⁸ Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Think About

In Luke’s day, the temple stood in the heart of Jerusalem and represented the sacred place where heaven and earth meet, and where God’s presence had been uniquely felt in Israel’s past. Here, amidst the routines of temple life, Zechariah, one of thousands of priests, was chosen by lot to enter the Holy Place and burn

incense before God—a once-in-a-lifetime honor. The incense offering, a ritual rich with symbolism, was accompanied by the prayers of the people gathered outside. It was a fragrant reminder of their petitions rising to God. Here, in the temple, their collective prayers rose alongside the sweet-smelling incense, a plea for deliverance and an offering of hope.

While Zechariah performed this sacred act, the crowd outside waited, praying for God's mercy and for the redemption of Israel. The people outside would have understood the significance of this moment, especially the evening offering, which was seen as a time when their hopes and longings reached heaven.¹

In this setting of profound worship and devotion, the stage is set for God's intervention. Zechariah's act of service, on behalf of all the people, symbolizes their enduring hope that God would act, that he would fulfill his promises.

Reflect

What promises of God are you holding onto during this season of your life? Ask the Spirit to give you assurance of God's faithfulness through his Word.

Day 3

It shouldn't surprise us that Jesus' story begins in the temple, the place God designed specifically to meet with his people. God's presence hadn't dwelled there for hundreds of years, yet faithful priests like Zechariah still performed the ancient rituals. During the lighting of the incense, he has a dramatic encounter.

Read

Luke 1:11–17 (NIV)

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

¹ Darrell L. Bock, [Luke: 1:1–9:50](#), vol. 1, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 80.

Think About

What would you do if an angel appeared in front of you?

As Zechariah stood in the Holy Place an angel of the Lord appeared beside the altar. Understandably, the sheer majesty of the angel filled Zechariah with fear. The angel Gabriel had come to deliver a message that would transform Zechariah's life and fulfill promises Israel had long awaited (Bock, 80-81). Gabriel stood at the altar, the place of prayer, as if to emphasize that his message was God's response to both Zechariah's personal prayers and the prayers of the people for redemption.

Have you ever prayed for something so often and for so long that you gave up and stopped asking? I imagine that's how Zechariah and Elizabeth might have felt about having a son. Yet, Gabriel's declaration that Zechariah's prayer had been heard reminds us of the faithfulness of God, who remembers and treasures the prayers of his people, even when those prayers seem to fade in our own hearts (Anyabwile, 22-24).

God's response was not only to grant Zechariah and Elizabeth a son but to give them a child with a unique and powerful purpose. He hadn't forgotten the prayers of Israel either. Named John, meaning "God is gracious," this child would be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb and would be set apart, a new Elijah, to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. His life would be marked by a call to turn the hearts of the people back to God, a revival that had been anticipated since the close of the Old Testament (Perrin, 25-28).

Gabriel's words echo the promise of Malachi, picking up where the prophet left off centuries earlier. With the birth of John, God's silence is broken, and his redemptive plan begins to unfold in new ways. John's mission would be to prepare a people for the Lord, calling them to repentance and renewal, and to ready their hearts for the Messiah who would soon appear.

In this powerful moment, God reveals that he has been working all along, honoring his promises and orchestrating history in his perfect timing. This story of Zechariah's encounter with Gabriel assures us that God is always faithful and that, even after long seasons of silence, he still speaks to his people, preparing us to receive his promises.

Reflect

During Advent, we are reminded that God hears and answers our prayers, even when his timing or methods are beyond our understanding. Reflect on your past. When did God fulfill a desire or answer a prayer in a way you didn't expect, but in hindsight, you know his way was for the best? Praise him for his goodness, and allow that memory to comfort you as you wait to see what he will do in your future.

Day 4

It would be astonishing to encounter an angel, but the message Gabriel delivered to Zechariah was hard to believe. At an old age and after years of infertility, the couple would become the parents of a very special son who had a key role to play in the arrival of Jesus.

Let's see how Zechariah responds.

Read

Luke 1:18–22 (NIV)

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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."

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²² 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.

²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ "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."

Think About

Zechariah had a hard time believing the angel's announcement and questions him. Before we judge the priest too harshly, consider how we might have responded to such news. Even in the presence of an angel, we might also be tempted to focus on our human limitations, rather than God's divine power.

Like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah couldn't see beyond his circumstances, seeking instead a tangible sign to confirm God's word. Gabriel responded not by providing comfort but by correcting Zechariah's doubt, temporarily silencing him as both a sign and a consequence. Zechariah's inability to speak became a daily reminder of the power of God's word. (Wright, 7-8; Anyabwile, 25).

Zechariah's muteness held profound meaning beyond his own chastisement, pointing back to Israel's history and forward to God's plans for redemption. The angel Gabriel's identity as the same messenger from Daniel's prophecies highlights that this moment was not just a personal revelation for Zechariah but a turning point in God's redemptive history. For four hundred years, God had been silent; now, with the promise of John's birth, that silence was breaking, and Israel's restoration was beginning. Zechariah's temporary muteness echoed Israel's long wait, emphasizing that God's plan was unfolding just as He had promised, though perhaps not in the way or the timing people had expected (Perrin, 28-30).

Zechariah's silence offers a unique lesson: sometimes, God invites us into seasons of quiet so we can better listen, reflect, and remember that his promises are true. In Elizabeth's pregnancy, we see that God never forgets his people, fulfilling both personal desires and larger redemptive promises. For those of us waiting for answers, Zechariah and Elizabeth's story reminds us that God's timing is perfect, his promises secure, and his plans infinitely greater than we can imagine.

Reflect

Praise God for working out his divine plan through people like Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John the Baptist. Praise him for using ordinary people in extraordinary ways.

Day 5

How has Zechariah's and Elizabeth's story spoken to you this week? Reflect and pray, inviting the Spirit to guide you.

Read

Read through [Luke 1:5–25](#) one more time.

How does this story offer us hope in God's grand redemptive plan? That he is working to make all things right?

How does this story offer us hope in our own circumstances?

Pray and Respond

As we enter this season of Advent, Zechariah and Elizabeth's story offers us a beautiful picture of hope. They waited through years of disappointment having passed the age when their dream of having a child seemed possible. Yet, Advent reminds us that waiting is often a time when God is working in ways unseen. For Zechariah and Elizabeth, their faithful waiting became part of God's redemptive story—a story that would prepare the way for the coming Messiah and offer hope to all people.

During Advent, we, too, enter a season of waiting, of longing for God to bring light into the dark places of our world and lives. Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, we may find ourselves waiting with unanswered prayers or unfulfilled desires, but their story encourages us to trust in God's goodness even when the wait feels long. We can find hope in the waiting.

In this Advent season, let's not let our disappointments drive us from God. As we wait, let's hold onto the hope that God is at work in the silence, preparing us for something greater. This Christmas, may we remember that the gift we ultimately wait for is not in what we receive, but in his presence — Jesus, Immanuel, God with us.

What's Your Next Step?

In prayer, reflect on your next steps.

- Spend extended time with God in prayer. Bring your unfulfilled longings to him, knowing that he hears you and is with you.

- In this busy holiday season, how can you keep your focus on Jesus and make the most of opportunities to love those around you? Ask the Spirit to guide you.
- This Christmas, how can you share the hope of the gospel with others around you? Consider how you can encourage the people in your life through your words and actions. How can you bring the hope of Christmas in the places where you live, work, and play? Check out [Christ Fellowship's Love Your Neighbor Toolkit](#) for some ideas.