

2. Waiting for Joy

What is the one thing you most look forward to every year at Christmas?

It could be the Christmas meal. Back in Australia, Christmas day is in the middle of summer, so every year there is the family discussion about whether we're doing hot or cold Christmas lunch. Half of our family likes the traditional roast turkey or pork or ham. But the other half like the idea of shrimp and seafood on the BBQ with cold salads. We come from a big family, so we normally have all of the above!

So perhaps you look forward to the Christmas meal. Or maybe you look forward to the gift-giving. When I was a kid, I could hardly wait for Christmas, to find out what presents would be under the Christmas tree. And Christmas morning my brothers and sisters and I would have to wait until our parents woke up before we were allowed to open anything. I remember waking up in the middle of the night, I was so excited for presents!

Or maybe it's the family gathering that you look forward to. After we did Christmas lunch with our immediate family, we would always head over to one of our cousins' houses in the late afternoon to do Christmas all over again. I remember having so much fun with my cousins playing with our new toys, and just spending time together.

One of the best parts about Christmas is looking forward to it. The waiting. The anticipation.

And of course, Advent is all about waiting as well. Waiting for the advent, or the coming of the baby Jesus at Christmas. And waiting for the joy that his arrival brings.

That's what I want to focus on this morning – waiting for joy. So why don't we pray that God would bring us the joy of waiting, and the joy that comes with Jesus at Christmas.

Our heavenly Father, as we wait for Christmas this year, will you help us wait with joy. Joy because of your goodness, joy because of your promises, and joy because of your son, Jesus. Help us to know joy this Christmas. We pray this in the precious name of Jesus. Amen

Something else I looked forward to every Christmas as a kid were the old Claymation Christmas movies produced by Rankin Bass in the 60s and 70s. I think the older ones amongst us would have seen them – Rudolph The Red Nosed Reindeer, Frosty the Snow Man, Santa Claus is Coming' to Town (narrated by Fred Astaire), and don't forget The Little Drummer Boy. When they started playing those stories during the Saturday morning cartoons, you knew Christmas was coming.

I love the old stories, and that's why every year I love to come back to the old stories about the very first Christmas. And so that's what we'll be doing over the next few weeks – delving into the story of Jesus' birth told from Luke 1 & 2.

I hope for you that it's like curling up under a blanket for a bedtime story, something that brings you back to the joy and wonder of hearing those stories as a kid, or perhaps hearing them with that same childlike wonder, as we have Christmas at home this year.

So let yourself be transported back 2000 years. Back to a very different time, to a very different place, to a very different people: to a people who were waiting...

1. The Promise of Joy

You might remember from last week, we read from the prophet Zephaniah that the people of God were waiting for the day when the Lord would come. The day when he would come and remove their enemies and restore their fortunes. The day when God would bring his people home... Well that prophecy was over 500 years before our story this morning. That's a long time to wait. And some of God's people had been waiting very patiently, waiting for that prophecy (and others) to be fulfilled. Waiting for the promised child...

That's where Zechariah and Elizabeth are introduced in Luke chapter 1. Zechariah is a priest in the temple in Jerusalem, born to a long line of priests going all the way back to when the temple was first built. I think it would be like being able to trace your family back to the Mayflower – Zechariah's family goes all the way back. The same as his wife, Elizabeth. She can trace her family back to Aaron, to Moses' own brother.

This is a family with history. And a history with the Lord. We're told by Luke in 1:6 that

⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

Blameless doesn't mean that they were perfect, but rather that they had faith in God's promises of forgiveness and salvation for those who walk with him. They lived their lives according to what they believed. Theirs was a genuine faith – a faith that made sense even when it's hard to make sense of life.

And that was true for Zechariah and Elizabeth. Because we read in v7:

⁷ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Life doesn't always happen the way we expect it to, and for Zechariah and Elizabeth, that meant accepting that they couldn't have children. They are old when we meet them, but you can maybe imagine what it was like for them as a young married couple trying to fall pregnant,

and expecting it to happen, and waiting for the telltale signs. And then the disappointment, month after month, year after year, until it was obvious that they would never have children.

I know that some of you watching today know that feeling, the waiting, the aching, the loss. And I know that it can be especially difficult around the holidays... If infertility is part of your story, know that we prayed for you this week, and we'll pray for you again after church today.

So that's Zechariah and Elizabeth. An old man and an old woman, no longer waiting for their own child, but still waiting for the child promised by the prophets.

And that's when something extraordinary happens to Zechariah. God chooses Zechariah for a special honor – by casting lots, Zechariah is chosen to act as the priest who burns incense on the altar in the place where God comes to meet with his people (Exodus 30:6-8). This was an honor originally given to Aaron – the first priest over the people of God. Now God has chosen Zechariah to step into that role.

And the reason becomes clear. While all the worshippers are gathered outside praying, Zechariah enters the temple to burn incense.

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

God sends an angel, a messenger – it's the same word in the original language. God sends an angel to deliver a message to Zechariah.

Of course, Zechariah is terrified (v12). Although, should he have been so surprised, standing in the place where God comes to meet with his people, to see a messenger from God? We might ask the same question of ourselves – should we be surprised to hear God speaking to us this morning, prompting us, pricking our consciences, penetrating soul and spirit, joints and marrow with his word as we come and sit in his presence... (Hebrews 4:12)? Hold that thought – we'll come back to it in a minute.

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.

Can you imagine what was going on inside Zechariah's head as the angel was speaking? First, there's an angel. My wife is going to bear me a son. Wait, we can't have children. He'll be a joy and a delight to you... Yes, that would be indescribable – a child. A son. What we've always dreamed about. *And many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.*

This baby brings a promise of joy. Not just the joy of parenthood for an elderly couple – although that’s amazing in itself. No, this baby will be the cause of rejoicing for *many* people because his birth will mark a major movement in the history of God’s people. The birth of this son heralds the return of the Lord, and the end of the long period of waiting that God’s people had endured over hundreds of years.

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.**”

John – John the Baptist, as he would become – is given the task of preparing God’s people for his return. Many of them had wandered away from God, many had stopped believing. The waiting was too hard, the temptations too many, the distractions too consuming.

As we come into Christmas this year, where is your heart? Where is your treasure? Where is your hope and peace? Just like the people in Zechariah’s time, it is all too easy to wander through life focused on everything that matters the most to you, without looking up to see the one thing that matters for all eternity. Even for those of us who are in church every week, the distractions are real. The pull of the world is strong.

But this passage reminds us that we need to be prepared for the Lord. We need to be prepared for the day he returns. Or the day he calls us home. Are you prepared? Where is your heart this Christmas?

I love that every year, the Christmas story reminds us that God wants to prepare us for his coming! God wants us to know the joy, the rejoicing, the happiness of a life lived in his presence. A life lived in the joy of forgiveness, the joy of thankfulness, the joy of hopefulness. This story is an annual reminder, because we need to be reminded of what is most important in life! Do you know the joy of knowing Jesus?

2. The Promise of Joy

It’s not always easy. A few years ago when I was teaching in Africa, I was sharing a meal with my students. They were very excited as we lined up for the meal, because that night they were serving *ugali*. “Do you like ugali?” they asked me? I’m not sure, I was thinking, because I’ve never eaten it. “It’s delicious!” they tell me. And as we get closer to the buffet I can see what they’re talking about. It’s a huge platter with a mountain of white stuff on it – come to think of it, it looked a bit like Mount Kilimanjaro. But as the students dug into it, I could see that it was a doughy, slightly sticky substance that looked a bit like playdough. And that’s a pretty good description of ugali – playdough made from cornmeal, or taro or cassava. One of my students served me a large portion. “You’re going to love it!” he said.

I did not love ugali. It tasted like it looked. And it didn't taste any better rolled up with my fingers and dipped in the rest of the dinner, as it's traditionally eaten. I felt bad for leaving it on my plate... Every African I've met loves ugali. But my experience has taught me to be unsure.

For Zechariah, his experience of disappointment makes it hard to believe the angel's words.

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

It's physically impossible, Zechariah thinks to himself. How do you invest your heart into something that doesn't seem like it could be real?

That's a question for all of us. There are people listening who have heard the Christian message a number of times, but in your experience it just doesn't seem to deliver on its promises. Why should I give my whole heart to believing this story from so long ago? Why should I put myself out there when it seems like we just wait and wait and there's no answer from God...

Have you ever felt like that? I'm guessing that we've all had days like that, where our world is crashing down and it seems like no one is listening.

Do you remember what the angel said to Zechariah? V13:

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.

God hears our prayers. God is at work behind the scenes. And God will do what he has promised to do...

For Zechariah, that promise was to give him a child. Just like God had promised Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age. And even though they waited 25 years from the promise to the fulfillment, God was true to his word. Zechariah should have remembered that. Just like he should have remembered Rebekah and Rachel and Hannah whose stories were similar. In each of their lives, God did something amazing, as each of their children carried the promises of God into the next generation, progressing the story of how God would eventually bring about the birth of the ultimate child of promise.

But it can be hard to recognize history when you're part of it.

You and I, we are part of history. Part of God's history, the history that he is writing about the people of God as he gathers us from the four corners of the globe and brings us home, into his presence, into his kingdom, into his family – into his **joy**. Joy is central to the Christmas story. Joy is what the angels announced to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth:

*I bring you good news that will cause great **joy** for all the people. (Luke 2:10)*

God has promised a future of **joy** for all who come to this little baby in the manger. For all who worship Jesus, for all who live lives that honor him, for all who genuinely make him part of their meaning of life. Christmas is all about Jesus, and finding him, and finding the ultimate joy that we can know as humans.

How do we know it's true? The angel says to Zechariah (v19):

"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.

This angel, this messenger, this terrifying creature has stood in the presence of God and heard his message straight from the lips of the Lord himself. It's as if God was standing there in person, just like he had promised Aaron so long ago. *This is the place where I will meet with you...*

We don't normally get angels delivering us messages, although it's not impossible. What we do have is the words of God recorded for us, written down by faithful witnesses. Inspired by God, as it says in 2 Timothy 3:16. And carefully put together to help us believe. Listen to what Luke says about his account of the life of Jesus.

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

God doesn't want to leave us wondering. He wants us to know for certain that his promises are trustworthy and true. This is not a fairytale, this is a message from God that should startle us and frighten us a little bit, but should also bring us great joy.

Because the Christmas story doesn't end with Jesus coming as a baby. It doesn't even end with him dying on a cross for the forgiveness of sins and rising again to give us new life. The end of the story is still to come. As the writer to the Hebrews said:

he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. (Hebrews 9:28)

The Christmas story reminds us that we are looking forward to something better than a turkey dinner, something better than gifts under the tree, something better than having the family around us. In Jesus, we are looking forward to an eternity of joy, in his salvation, on the day that he returns.

What are you looking forward to this Christmas?

Will you pray with me?

Prayers: Charlotte Bidwell

Adapted from *Repeat the Sounding Joy, a daily advent devotional on Luke 1-2*, by Christopher Ash.

Blessed Lord, who has caused all the Bible to be written for our learning, we thank you that the story that we hear from Luke is true and safe and secure, and we can rest our lives and our eternal destinies upon the message we hear in it. Grant that, as we meditate quietly on this old, old story, our hearts may be comforted by the solid certainty that these things are true. May we know in some fresh way this Advent the comfort of your holy word, and embrace and hold it fast in our hearts and minds.

God our Father, who has promised new life to this who have no hope, as you promised a son to this old couple who were beyond hoping: grant us grace to listen, to trust, and to set our hopes on the gospel you speak to us, that we may live by faith and not by sight.

We pray for the Kids Christmas Cookie Decorating event this afternoon. We thank you for the 23 kids who have signed up, and we pray that it will be a blessing to them and to their parents as they watch on. Father, we ask that you would use this event to encourage our hearts, and to see that you are at work growing the church and your kingdom as we share the good news of Jesus in the Napa Valley and beyond. Lord, we lift up our church before you, and ask you to do your work through us.

We bring all these prayers before you, entrusting our lives to you in all things. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.