

The Christmas season is upon us. We see Christmas lights on houses, downtown and in Riel by the park. Shopping Centers are fully decked out in their Christmas gear. Once December hits this week, we will be full on into the Christmas season.

With it comes the potential for joy, sadness, and everything in between. Some of us will go into this Christmas with great joy looking forward to seeing people because of something that happened this past year. Maybe there's a new little one in our family. Maybe we have a new job or a new relationship. Maybe we go into our first Christmas as a married couple; or with much better health. Maybe we had a brush with death this year which heightens our appreciation of Christmas.

Some of us may go into Christmas with dread or sadness. It's the first Christmas since our loved one passed away. Maybe it's our first Christmas with a serious diagnosis. We wonder if it will be our last Christmas. Maybe we lost our job this past year and are still searching for a new one. Maybe our family split up and it will be the first Christmas navigating that.

Some of us go into this season waiting for something. Maybe a couple who wants a family and has struggled to get pregnant. Maybe you are single and waiting to find your soul mate. Maybe you are a parent of a prodigal. You have prayed for God to bring them home or come back to Christ. Maybe you are waiting for a diagnosis; or test results; or an appointment or for clear direction. Our culture does not teach us how to wait. It discourages waiting by trying to provide everything efficiently. It may subtly tell us waiting is bad. So do whatever you can to avoid it or shorten it. I have a confession to make today. I am not very good at waiting. I am a fellow traveler with you when it comes to waiting. But waiting is part of life. Everyone has to wait at times. So might there be something good or something we can learn while we wait? Might God use waiting to do something important in our lives?

This theme of waiting permeates the Christmas story. Many of the people in this account had to wait on God for something. So, this Christmas season, we're going to look at the Christmas story through the lens of waiting. We're going to ask questions like "Why would God make us wait?" "Can waiting on

God bring good?" "What are we waiting for when we wait on the Lord?" "How do we wait on the Lord?" "What is the pathway towards healthy waiting?" I'm going to bring answers to each question as we walk through the Christmas story. I pray God will use this to encourage and help us as we wait. So if you're waiting on God for something today, maybe ask the Lord to speak to your spirit about that through our time together.

This series will come entirely from the Gospel of Luke. We start today in Luke 1, with the account of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Please find Luke 1. It's page 721 in the Bibles in front of you. Let's find out the beginning of the Christmas story from Luke's perspective.

Luke 1:1-25 (ESV)

1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

⁵ In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

⁸ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." ²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. ²³ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ²⁵ “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”

Luke begins by writing an intro for a person called Theophilus. He could have commissioned Luke to write this Gospel or Luke may have written with Theophilus in mind. But we see the purpose of Luke's Gospel in verse 4. Luke writes so Theophilus may “have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.” Luke writes to strengthen the reader's faith.

Then he begins by setting the story at a specific time in history. “In the days of Herod, king of Judea.” Those words might immediately bring to mind a dark time for a Jewish reader. Herod ruled harshly. He jealously protected his power to the point of killing family members who threatened him. He heavily taxed the people to fund his huge building projects. He knew he was universally hated. So he arranged for his burial site to remain secret lest someone dig him up and disgrace his body.

So the people in that time lived under double oppression. The Romans occupied their nation and ruled with a heavy hand. Herod ruled harshly with taxation and terror. And they had not heard a prophetic voice from God for a long time. They knew about the promised Messiah from Isaiah, 700 years ago. They heard about some forerunner to the Messiah in the Spirit of Elijah 400 years ago from the prophet Malachi. But they heard nothing since then. They had waited over 4 centuries.

Then Luke introduces us to Zechariah and Elizabeth. He's a priest and she's a priest's daughter. They lived righteously before God and kept His commandments. They weren't perfect. But they earnestly pursued a serious walk with God. In their culture, people believed that anyone who walked with God would automatically receive God's blessings which included children. Yet Luke informs us in verse 7 that they had no child for Elizabeth was barren. They had now reached their senior years. So they had waited many years for a child. Had they given up hope? We don't know. But we do know that despite this disappointment, they continued to walk with the Lord.

Now priests lived all through the country. They were 24 divisions of them. They had to come to Jerusalem twice a year for one week to help with temple responsibilities. During that time, priests from

the country would draw lots. If their lot came up, they get the privilege of going into the temple to burn incense in prayer before God. This privilege was so rare, that you could only do it once in your lifetime. Estimates put the number of priests at that time around 8000. So not everyone would get an opportunity to burn incense and pray right outside the Holy of Holies.

Yet Zechariah's lot is drawn. So during the hour of prayer, he leaves the people praying outside, goes into the temple. He prays while standing with his incense. This is the highlight of his life as a priest.

Suddenly, someone else stands near him. It is the angel of the Lord. Luke tells us Zechariah was troubled and fear fell upon him. He had good reason to fear. He expected to be alone. No prophetic message from the Lord had come during his lifetime. In He was not prepared for an encounter with the angel of the Lord.

The angel immediately addresses Zechariah's fear. Verse 13 – "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard." What prayer? Was it the prayer that Zechariah had just prayed in the temple? If so, Zechariah had a responsibility to pray for the redemption of Israel. He needed to lift up the people before the Lord and cry out for help amidst their oppression. Did he also slip in a personal prayer request for a child? It's possible.

Maybe the angel links to the prayer for Israel's redemption to the child. He would have certainly played a role in Israel's redemption. Or the angel could be referring to the previous prayer of Zechariah and Elizabeth for a child over the years. Did they still ask for this even though they were advanced in years? We don't know. But we do know that the angel's information answers Zechariah's prayer.

The angel goes on to describe the special role this child will play in God's purposes. He will be a son whom they will name John. He will bring great joy and gladness to them and to many. He will be great before the Lord. He must radically devote his life to the Lord. He is the only person we know of who had the Holy Spirit in him before birth.

In verses 16-17, the angel describes this child's mission. These words come right out of the prophet Malachi. "He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the

wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord, a people prepared.” God will fulfill the words of the prophet Malachi given 400 years previously. This child will prepare the people to meet the Messiah. God is on the move.

This is good news especially for a devout person like Zechariah. His prayer has been answered. His son will serve as forerunner to the Messiah. That means the Messiah is coming soon.

So how does Zechariah react? Verse 18. “How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years?” I have great sympathy for Zechariah. He walked with the Lord for many years. He persevered with the Lord through the unanswered prayer for a child. He carried out his duties faithfully. He suddenly encounters this messenger from the Lord who makes incredible promises. Maybe, if the promise was not so personal, Zechariah would be fine. Maybe if the child would be born to some other family, he would have rejoiced at the good news.

However, he looked at his own circumstances, his own resources and the reality that old people don't have babies. But he went further. He not only lacked knowledge about how God would do this. He lacked belief that God could do this. For that, Zechariah should have known better because there were examples of God doing this in his people's history. Most famously, Abraham and Sarah had a son, Isaac, when Abraham was 99 and Sarah was 91. God did that to show it was only by His power that the line of Abraham continued. If God could do that, He would certainly preserve them as a people through whatever they faced.

It's possible that Zechariah allowed the long years of waiting on the Lord to degenerate into some disbelief in the Lord's words and ability. **Long-term waiting on the Lord can degrade into unbelief of the Lord.** I wonder if that's a possibility for any of us here today or watching online. Maybe there's something that you've been asking of the Lord for years. It has not happened. Maybe you have let your heart drift from belief and faith to unbelief and doubt about God.

Satan does not sit around when he sees this happening in our lives. He pounces during times of waiting to cast doubt on God's goodness and character. Since we are so unaccustomed to waiting, we are vulnerable. Think about Adam and Eve in the garden. God was gone for a few hours or maybe a

day. In that short time period of waiting, the serpent pounces. They do not believe God's good word and follow the serpent.

Devout and mature Christians, who have walked with God for decades, are still vulnerable to unbelief about God or His abilities. Maybe Zechariah did not even know that this shadow existed in his heart. Yet when presented with the humanly impossible, unbelief popped out of his mouth. Notice Zechariah asserts his claim and his reality with the word "I." "How shall I know this? I am an old man."

Then the angel responds with his own "I" statements. Verse 19. "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news." What a contrast. You've got lack of knowledge and human weakness in Zechariah. You've got all of God's knowledge and God's strength in the angel. Gabriel reminds Zechariah of this reality.

In a way, Zechariah asked for a sign. The angel will give him a sign but not one that he wants. It is the sign of silence. Suddenly, Zechariah is unable to speak and will remain so for the duration of the pregnancy. Yet there is still mercy. Gabriel affirms that God's words will be fulfilled. This child will be born. But Zechariah went wait in silence.

While all this is going on, the people wait outside. They begin to wonder what's going on. Traditionally, the priest who offered the prayer comes out and then offers the priestly blessing on the people. "The Lord bless you and keep you." Finally, Zechariah comes out. But he can't talk. They realize, he's seen a vision. So he makes signs to them. Then he finishes his service and goes home.

Elizabeth becomes pregnant. We're told she keeps herself hidden for 5 months. Why? The Lord has "taken away her reproach" she says. Yet she waits before coming out into public. Maybe it was because she had borne a lot of shame and taunting and cruel comments for years. Maybe some callous person said things like "If you really walked with God, you would have children. So there must be something you need to confess; something wrong with you; something that you're hiding." People would certainly notice that Zechariah couldn't talk. If in the early days of her pregnancy, she claimed to be pregnant, imagine the sneers. Maybe the Lord directed her to wait. Or maybe they entered into a time

of reflection and prayer confessing the unbelief in their hearts. But the child is on the way and will soon arrive.

The most important thing about this passage is God's action and movement on His saving purposes. From that we can learn something about times of waiting in our life. Long-term waiting on the Lord can degrade into unbelief of the Lord. So how can we guard against that? Well, we need a renewed perspective about God. We need a revamped approach to waiting on Him. **Since God keeps His Word in His time, we must continue to trust Him with believing dependence.** So let's unpack this phrase by phrase.

So the renewed perspective about God is that He keeps His Word in His time. When God decides to do something, He will do it in His time. His timing is perfect. John 5:17 – Jesus – My Father is always at His work. Yet we often don't see that or don't trust His timing. We think we know best when things need to happen. But God is always at His work setting in place all the variables for the perfect time. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says, "He has made everything beautiful in its time." Romans 5:6 says, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." Galatians 4:4 says "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son." When we remember God's wisdom and perfection, it can help us give over the timing to Him. We must also recognize that sometimes God's will is different than ours. He is far greater and higher than us. Sometimes God uses our time of waiting to soften our hearts to His purposes. I remember when I received news that my dad might be in his last days. I flew from Ottawa to Calgary praying that God would heal and renew him. But after a couple of days seeing the depth of his suffering my heart changed. God helped me freely release my dad to Him. God decided my dad's time had come. But He also worked with us to accept this. Renewed perspective – God keep His Word in His time. Revamped approach to waiting.

Then we must continue to trust Him with believing dependence. Yes, it is hard to wait. Thankfully, God doesn't just leave us to endure the waiting on our own. God doesn't keep us waiting because He likes seeing us squirm. We can depend on the Lord every day all the time for the strength and

perseverance to wait. That doesn't mean that we just sit around and watch the clock until God does something. We present our requests to God. We leave them in His hand and time. We ask for His strength to keep going in the face of uncertainty. Psalm 62 says – "Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us." We keep doing that which is before us in everyday life. We go to our jobs and glorify Him. We go to our classes and do our assignments. We ask for His strength and joy to persevere with little ones at home. We keep on seeking Him through prayer and Bible reading. We connect with other believers and ask for their prayers to help us wait. We continue to go deeper with God learning that we can trust Him with all that concerns us. So we must not waste our waiting. We can use it to cultivate that believing dependence on the Lord. Then it is less likely that our unity on God will degrade into unbelief in God.

So, I invite you today to bring to the Lord anything in your life for which you wait. Or maybe we need to confess that we've allowed unbelief in the Lord to creep into our heart. Maybe we need to acknowledge that we are only looking at our own knowledge and abilities in this situation. Maybe we need to pray for what the father of the boy with an unclean spirit said. "I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief." Or we may need to ask for wisdom from the Lord on how to not waste this time of waiting. Will you come to the Lord now and present your need to Him?