

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
 Sermon: "Angels of Advent: Gabriel & Zechariah"
 Scripture: Luke 1:1-25
 Rev. Steve Filyk
 November 30, 2025
 Bells Prelude: 'In a Manger'
 Opener: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
 Candle Lighting Hymn: Hope is a Star, verse 1
 Choruses: Way Maker, There is a Redeemer
 Choir & Bells: 'Christmas is Coming'
 Closer: "Hail to the Lord's anointed"
 Bells Postlude: "Come Behold the Newborn King"

A 2022 nation survey
 revealed that "36 percent of the Canadian population
 reported that they pray once a month or more."
 That number nearly doubles when it comes to Christians.
 The same survey reported that
 "Sixty-four percent of self-identifying Christians
 [residing in] British Columbia pray at least once a month"

(Retrieved November 28, 2025, from Cardus website:
<https://www.cardus.ca/research/faith-communities/reports/the-shifting-landscape-of-faith-in-canada/#executive-summary>)

Statistics can tell us how often we pray,
 but they can't tell us what happens in our hearts
 when the prayer we've carried for years seems unanswered.

And that brings me to a question for us today...
 What is the longest time you've brought
 To a specific petition to God?

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus told his followers a parable
 About a persistent widow
 harassing a judge till she received justice. (Luke 18)
 He told this to teach us perseverance in prayer.

Which brings us to today's lesson.

In today's lesson we hear about an answer to prayer,
 After a long period of waiting.

Last week we left Jacob's family settling in Egypt.
 Today we pick up the story of God's people many centuries later,
 at the dawn of the New Testament, with the birth of John.

In this leap from Genesis to Luke's,
 we pass over centuries:

the Exodus,
 the law at Sinai,
 Israel's kingdom,
 exile and return,
 rule under the Greek Empire
 the brief Maccabean independence,
 and finally, occupation by Rome.

Those centuries between Jacob and Luke aren't just historical background
 they show us that God's people
 have always lived in a long season of waiting.

The approximately 400 years
 between the words of the last Old Testament prophet
 To the birth of Christ
 are "known as the intertestamental period"
 And sometimes called 'the silent years'
 Because of this apparent silence of God.
 (CBSB 1577)

The people of Israel waited in this silence
 And prayed for the arrival of a Savior.
 And in today's story
 There is a couple that had been waiting

and praying for a son:
Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Scripture tells us that they were both
From the priestly family of Aaron,
Which makes them descendants of Levi,
One of Joseph's older brothers.

Scripture tells us that they are righteous in God's sight,
But that at the same time they are childless.
The author wants us to know
that despite a common belief
That having no children was a sign of God's disfavour
They have been keeping God's commandments.
(CBSB 1738)

Scripture tells us they were righteous, childless, and well advanced in years—
the sort of age where you no longer expect surprises.
But God seems to enjoy shaking up seniors.
And into their silence a new word is spoken.

Zechariah and his division had been called up
To serve their allocated term of priestly duties (likely just for a week)
But within this time Zechariah had been chosen by lot
To burn incense at the altar, a once-in-a-lifetime privilege.

It is while he is doing this that
“an angel of the Lord [appears] to him”
And tells him that his prayer had been heard.

While Zechariah stands vibrating with fear
The angel gives him directions about the child's name, John,
And food restrictions that will fit John's special consecration.
And the angel, who is revealed to be Gabriel,
tells him about the John's incredible calling.
John will bring joy to his parents
And will usher in a promised era.

Filled with the Holy Spirit from birth,
And living in the Spirit and power of Elijah,
He will “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.”
(Luke 1:17)

So how does Zechariah respond
To this supernatural encounter
And this message of incredible blessing.

He has a hard time believing it.
“How can I be sure of this? [He asks]
I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”
(Luke 1:18)

Even while standing before an angel,
Zechariah struggles to believe
that God could overturn what felt like years of unanswered prayer.
And so he asks for a sign, for confirmation.
Gabriel provides this by striking him mute.

“... 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.
(Luke 1:20)

We are told that Zechariah stumbles out of the Temple
Into a crowd conclude by his face and his hand signals,
That he has seen a vision.
When his time of service is completed,
He returns home with Elizabeth
Whose menopause is suddenly paused
And becomes pregnant.

This is quite the story.
 But before you decide it is too fantastic,
 Remember that our writer Luke
 Has carefully investigate his story
 To write an 'orderly and reliable' account.

Imagine what it would have been like for a couple
 Who has prayed long and fervently
 To realise that what they had thought was a clear 'no'
 Was a 'not yet'.

Imagine what it would have been like for
 Old Elizabeth to finally feel a baby moving in her belly,
 Finally sharing a joy
 That she had only witnessed in others.

But their joy is only a small part of the great joy
 That the Lord has been planning.
 John would break that 400 year silence of God
 And prepare the people for their Savior.
 The joy they were experiencing would be multiplied
 Again and again.

When Elizabeth discovers she is pregnant
 She rejoices "The Lord has done this for me,
 In these days he has shown his favor
 and taken away my disgrace among the people."
 (Luke 1:25)

When John is finally born
 And given that name that Gabriel had commanded,
 Zechariah recovers his speech
 and inspired by God's Spirit,
 sings about a greater joy that would
 sweep the land.

Let me just share a few lines from Zechariah's song,

Known as the Benedictus:

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
 because he has come to his people and redeemed them.
 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
 in the house of his servant David
 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago)...

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."
 (Luke 1:68-70, 76-80)

What a wonderful story.
 And not just for Zechariah and Elizabeth
 And their nation 2000 years past.

This story also brings us hope.

First of all and most importantly it reminds us
 that God is working a great plan of salvation in human history.
 God works things out so and old couple
 Has a child that will prepare the way
 For the birth of another,
 God's only begotten son.
 That child born to a teenager
 Will bring good news to Israel
 And to everyone who trust in him.

God is working out human history

And his timing is perfect.

Amen.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had lived out their middle years
 Without the arrival of John.
 But for John to be the herald of Jesus,
 And for Mary to be Jesus' mother,
 Well that just meant that Elizabeth and Zechariah needed to wait
 And wait and wait.
 It is quite possible that they had concluded
 God's answer to their prayer was 'no'.
 Sometimes what feels like God's 'no' is really 'not yet.'
 When God weaves our lives together with the lives of others,
 the timing is often far more intricate than we can see.

God works out salvation in human history.
 God's timing is perfect.
 And God's blessings are much bigger
 Than our small requests.

Zechariah and Elizabeth ask for a child.
 God gives them a prophet—
 one who will prepare the world for its Savior.
 We all have our own personal concerns.
 Zechariah and Elizabeth just want their own baby.
 But the way God acts in the world
 Often exceeds these narrow parameters.
 God answers Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayer
 Even as God answers the prayers of a nation.

God blessed Zechariah and Elizabeth
 so they could become a blessing—
 and he does the same with us.
 In responding to our prayers,
 God doesn't simply give us what we want,
 but invites us into something bigger than we ever imagined.

Thanks be to God.

