

SERMON

1 Samuel 1:1–20; Luke 1:1–25

“Waiting in the Wilderness: Hannah and Elizabeth”

Second Sunday in Advent – December 7, 2025

First Presbyterian Church Grand Junction

Opening Prayer

Good morning!

Before I say anything else, I want to express my heartfelt thanks for the very warm welcome you have given to me, Heather, and Cameron. It means the world to us, and we can never say thank you enough.

It seems appropriate that my first sermon in this new pastoral call would be on the topic of waiting. Last Sunday, Pastor Tom affirmed that this congregation—this church family—has waited a long time in the process of calling a new associate pastor. In our Presbyterian System, *nothing* moves quickly. And even after the call was extended, there was more waiting still, as we packed up our lives and made our way from Washington to Grand Junction.

And I think it’s fair to say that from our side of things, there has also been a great deal of waiting. Our process began months ago when we first discerned that the Lord was calling us to seek a new pastoral call. That process is always both exciting and scary.

At the start of this new adventure, I think it is important you know something about me:

I really struggle with waiting. In fact, my favorite—and least effective—prayer of all time is:

“Lord, make me patient... right now!”

My second favorite prayer is “Lord, please let my Seattle Mariners make the World Series.”

Neither prayer has proven to be very effective.

As Pastor Tom said in last week’s sermon, “nobody likes to wait.”

But this is what Advent is all about—waiting for God to act, waiting for God to reach into our lives, waiting for God to finish the good work that is already underway in each one of us. And waiting is even harder in the wilderness.

In Scripture, the wilderness is a place of isolation, danger, and vulnerability. where faith is tested in ways we cannot predict.

Yet in Scripture, the wilderness is also a place of formation.

It is a spiritual crucible in which God uses times of challenge and hardship to conform us more closely to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Maybe this sounds idealized, but the real process of formation is anything but.

As we go along, you will quickly learn that I am a big fan of C.S. Lewis. In his remarkable book *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis wrote:

“We are like blocks of stone out of which the sculptor carves the forms of people. The blows of God’s chisel which hurt us so much are what make us perfect.”

One of the great mysteries of the Christian faith is that times of hardship—times in the wilderness—are often when we experience the deepest moments of spiritual growth. This doesn't mean we should seek out suffering; life will bring enough of that on its own. But it does mean God does not waste our wilderness seasons.

Today, in this second sermon of our Advent series on the wilderness of waiting, we are looking at two notable figures—one from the Old Testament and one from the New. The first is Hannah, who became the mother of Samuel, and the second is Elizabeth, who became the mother of John the Baptist.

Both women carry the wilderness of infertility—a tender and painful reality then and now. For many people, this remains a source of deep and private grief. And while today's sermon is not only about infertility, we must acknowledge that their waiting was profoundly personal, profoundly costly, and profoundly painful.

Yet Hannah and Elizabeth show us something essential:

God does some of His most surprising and transformative work not after the wilderness is over, but right in the heart of it.

I. Hannah: Waiting in the Wilderness of Tears

Hannah's story begins in a household marked by tension, sorrow, and the kind of emotional complexity many of us recognize in our own lives. Her husband, Elkanah, loves her deeply—Scripture goes out of its way to emphasize that. But even the sincerest human love cannot shield someone from the ache of unfulfilled longing. Nor can it protect her from the cruelty of Peninnah's taunting. Year after year, Peninnah turns Hannah's deepest wound into a weapon, reminding her of what she does not have, rubbing salt into a place already raw.

The Bible does not sanitize Hannah's pain or rush past it. It names her reality with honesty:

“Her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her... and Hannah wept and would not eat.”

This is not a symbolic or poetic wilderness. This is the kind that grips the stomach, tightens the throat, and steals appetite and sleep. This is emotional, relational, embodied suffering.

And it is *persistent*.

Year after year, Hannah journeys to Shiloh where the tabernacle stood. Year after year, she carries the same ache, the same unanswered prayer, the same sense that the heavens have gone quiet. Waiting is hardest not when we suffer once, but when we suffer again and again and nothing seems to change.

But there is something profoundly faithful—deeply courageous—about Hannah.

She keeps showing up.

She keeps making the journey.

Scripture says she prayed “in bitterness of soul.” That is not a failure of faith. That *is* faith—because she brought her bitterness to the only One who could hold it. She does not pretend. She does not posture. She simply pours herself out before God until she has no words left.

And in the mystery of God's timing—after years of silence, years of tears—God responds. Not because Hannah finally crafted the “right” prayer, not because she earned God's attention, but because the Lord is faithful and had never stopped listening.

The wilderness was not wasted.

In ways she could not see at the time, it shaped her. It deepened her compassion. It humbled her dependence. It prepared her for a calling she did not yet know she would have.

The child she longed for—Samuel—would become the prophet Israel needed for the next chapter of its story. Her private heartbreak would become the soil out of which God grew public blessing.

Hannah's waiting became the fertile ground for God's purpose—not only in her life, but in the life of God's people.

II. Elizabeth: Waiting in the Wilderness of Silence

And Hannah's story is not the last time God brings life into long-barren places.

Centuries later, Elizabeth's story opens in the quiet resignation of old age. Luke describes her and Zechariah as "righteous before God"—faithful, devout, steady. And yet, despite their righteousness, they lived with the ache Hannah knew.

They had prayed.

They had hoped.

And at some point, they must have stopped expecting anything to change.

Then one ordinary day, during Zechariah's priestly service in the temple, the angel Gabriel appears and says:

"Do not be afraid... your prayer has been heard."

Have you ever noticed that when an angel shows up in the bible, the first words spoken are almost always “do not be afraid”? An angelic visitation is *utterly* disruptive, and turns someone’s world *upside down*.

Out of nowhere, Gabriel tells Zechariah, “your prayer has been heard.”

Imagine hearing that after decades of silence, after decades of wandering in spiritual wilderness.

This text reminds us that in God’s economy, no sincere prayer is wasted. God gathers them, holds them, remembers them—sometimes long after we have stopped having the strength to pray them ourselves.

Elizabeth eventually conceives—no longer called barren, but blessed. Yet even in this joy, she withdraws for a time, saying:

“The Lord has done this for me... to take away my disgrace.”

She needed space. We can never forget that soul-level pain is not easily overcome. Even when deliverance finally arrives, we often need time to re-calibrate our lives and accept the full reality of God’s good and disruptive grace.

Elizabeth needed time to breathe. Time to accept that this was really happening.

She needed time for joy to seep into places long marked by sorrow.

Her wilderness shaped her too—and God met her in it.

And her son, John, would prepare the way for Christ Himself.

Again: **God brings world-changing grace out of quiet, unseen waiting.**

III. The Wilderness Forms the People God Will Use

Hannah's and Elizabeth's stories run on parallel tracks:

- Both are righteous, but suffering.
- Both experience deep wilderness.
- Both wait far longer than seems reasonable.
- Both continue to seek God in the midst of disappointment.
- And both give birth to men who prepare God's people for a new work.

Their waiting becomes the soil of God's transformation.

This is where the text speaks directly to us.

We all have wilderness places—places where waiting has worn thin:

Some of us arrive in Advent not with festive joy, but with the same questions Hannah and Elizabeth must have whispered through tears:

“Has God forgotten me?”

“Is God still listening?”

“Is this all there is going to be?”

But the good news of Advent is this:

God's faithfulness is not bound by our human limitations.
God's mercy is not constrained by our circumstances.
God's grace is not restricted by our inability to imagine what is possible.

If Scripture teaches us anything, it is that God delights in bringing life where life seems impossible, hope where hope has run out, and a future where none can be seen.

IV. The Heart of Advent: Waiting for a God Who Enters Our Wilderness

This year, Advent begins not with angels, shepherds, and mangers, but with two women who wondered if God had heard them at all.

In Advent, God reminds us that no waiting is wasted, no wilderness is final, and no story is beyond the reach of His redeeming love.

Conclusion: A Pastoral Word for This Church, This Advent

Friends, whatever wilderness you carry this season—
whatever ache you feel, whatever prayer seems unanswered—
may we know this:

God has not forgotten us.
God has not abandoned us.
God is at work, even now, preparing a future we cannot yet see.

Hannah waited.
Elizabeth waited.
And God was faithful.
This Advent, we can take heart:

As we grow together in this new season as a church family, we, like those before us, and like those who will come after us, will walk through wilderness places and joyful places—and the same God is faithful through them all. Amen.