Waiting for the Lord

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 1:5-25

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Now that Thanksgiving is over, it’s time to move toward Christmas. Many of you have already started the practical preparations of decorating, shopping, wrapping, and baking. These are fun and festive activities that can add to our celebration of Christmas. But Advent, which means “coming,” is to be a time of spiritual preparation. We are to prepare our hearts, minds, and souls for the coming of the Lord. What does that mean? What does that look like? Well, our passage gives us some ideas.

As Luke’s Gospel opens, we encounter a devout Jewish couple described as righteous and blameless before the Lord. And, then, there is that word but: “But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and both were getting on in years.” (1:7).

It’s hard for us to really appreciate Elizabeth’s experience in our day and age. To be barren was not simply a disappointing and painful experience. Elizabeth calls it a disgrace because children gave a woman a place in the community and allowed her to participate in the future welfare of the family. Elizabeth’s experience was one of true desperation, emptiness, and isolation. Her condition brings to mind other barren women in The Story, like Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah because this human condition reflects the spiritual reality of our lives apart from God.

So it is fitting that the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ begins with this barren woman and her husband who longed for the blessing of a new life. But, unlike our day with infertility treatments, there really was nothing they could do to make it happen—only pray and wait for God to act on their behalf.

Their personal experience reflects the larger story of the nation of Israel at that time. They were a people sitting in darkness who had not received a word from God for 400 years and they were living under the occupation and oppression of the Roman Empire. The people of God were in a barren, dark time as they waited for God to act in sending the Messiah to set them free. There was nothing they could do to make it happen. They were dependent on God to break through and do for them what they could not do for themselves.
I understand the darkness of infertility as Stuart and I wrestled through that experience for seven years before we finally adopted our sons Nate and Ian. We did everything we knew to do, but in the end, all we could do is wait, and wait, and wait. And I have to tell you, it was hard. It’s hard to wait.

God did break through in unexpected ways, but that time was long ago. Now, I am waiting for other things—and so are you. Like it or not, we all go through dark times, and we are all waiting for something in our lives. Some are waiting for healing, some are waiting for closure, some are waiting for new babies or new opportunities, some are waiting for reconciliation, and some are even waiting for that moment they will leave their earthly body to go home to be with the Lord.

It’s hard to wait in our Western culture. We don’t even like to sit at a stop light for 15 seconds or stand in a line for more than just a few minutes. Everything comes to us fast or instantly, so we are conditioned by our culture to be impatient people who want things to happen—now!

But waiting is a significant part of the spiritual life. It just is. I have found that it is in this season of waiting when it seems that nothing is happening, in fact, God is working, preparing me, preparing others, preparing a situation in ways I cannot perceive or predict or plan. It’s in these moments, when we feel so helpless and powerless, that we become painfully aware of our own barrenness or emptiness. Most of us keep so busy and so distracted because we don’t want to feel a twinge of sadness, or longing for something more.

But sometimes we encounter circumstances so overwhelming we can’t push it down. So that disappointment, desperation, and deep sense of longing rises to the surface opening us to God and our need for God to do what only He can do. And God comes to us—maybe not in the way we want, but in new, surprising, and often unexpected ways.

The passage takes us from the disappointment and darkness of barrenness to a very high and holy moment in Zechariah’s life as he is chosen to enter the sanctuary and offer the incense. It’s the opportunity of a lifetime that many of the priests would never have. At that moment, an angel of
the Lord appeared, saying, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son….With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him…to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (1:13, 17). Try to imagine what you might have felt like if an angel appeared to you and told you that the deepest longing of your heart was going to be fulfilled!

But this divine declaration Zechariah received from the angel is not just about this childless couple having a son. It’s a promise that God is about to do something great. God is about to break in and fulfill the promise to Israel, and He is going to do it, in part, through them. Their son will be a great prophet and a forerunner of the Messiah. Their waiting, and praying, and undoubtedly crying and hoping have not been in vain. God will use their pain and brokenness as a part of The Story of His redemptive work in the world.

This amazing story connects with our story, reassuring us in the midst of our most difficult circumstances that God hears our prayers. God cares about our experiences, our hurts, our pain. And though the reasons for our trouble and sorrow may never be clear in this lifetime, we can be assured that God is up to something—not only in our individual lives, but in the world. It’s not that everything we go through is good, but God is good, and loving and more powerful than what we can sometimes recognize. He has already made a divine declaration to us and to the world, and what He wants most from us is to trust Him—to trust that He is working His will in our lives and in the world, despite what our circumstances may show. And I believe God will come along in the course of our daily lives and experience to reassure us in just the ways we need, if we will only learn to listen.

Now, it can be hard to believe what God says in the midst of disappointments and the difficult circumstances, especially if you’ve been waiting a long time. It was hard for Zechariah, too; he had real doubt—even when the declaration from God was delivered to him by an angel. “Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How will I know that this is so?’” (1:18).

Zechariah was a priest who was praying fervently but who was not prepared for his prayers to be answered. He was officiating in the sanctuary itself, but he did not really expect to experience God’s presence.
He was someone who genuinely loved God and was serving God, but when the good news he was waiting for came, he wasn’t ready to receive it.

This passage challenges us because it shows that even the faithful may grow dull in their expectations. God longs for all of us to trust Him expectantly and to be prepared for His coming to us, to anticipate His announcement of good news, to rejoice in His response to our needs. But we can have a cynical response to our life and circumstances that echoes Zechariah’s, “How will I know that this is so?” Zechariah not only questions God, he gives the human reasons—the human limitations—for why it’s hard to trust God. Zechariah says, “I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years” (1:18). He doesn’t believe all things are possible with God.

I empathize with Zechariah. He clearly feels out of control, but his question reflects his compulsion to try to control, even by his words. I confess that I, too, sense these inner drives “to do” something—to control and change things, especially those things that are beyond my responsibility and capacity to change. I rather like the illusion that I am in control. And I don’t like waiting. And I know I am not alone in that.

Test yourself as you ask yourself these questions: Do you worry, even obsessively? Have you ever caught yourself over-analyzing situations and playing out alternatives and possible outcomes of what might happen if…? Do you talk to yourself, practicing conversations you want or wish you could have with a difficult person? Or do you talk a lot in an attempt to persuade people to your point of view? Do you hyper-focus on something you think you can control when other circumstances feel out of control? For me, it’s cleaning. When I can’t do anything about certain situations, I clean. When I finish, I like to look around and say, “Yay, I did something.” It usually only lasts five minutes, but at least I had that.

Some of you deal with this stress by disengaging from work or relationships, distracting yourself with more pleasant thoughts or activities like watching TV or going shopping, or just living in denial of some of the painful realities of life. We all have our strategies for dealing with the negative feelings of being out of control.
While we do need outlets for our stress, these false ways of attempting to control what we can't control often keep us from hearing God’s voice and recognizing His presence with us and yielding to His sovereignty. Like Zechariah, we’re not ready for the coming of the Lord.

Well, how do we get ready? How do we learn to hear God’s voice and recognize His presence? How do we get to a place where we are ready and willing to let go and let God? Again, the passage really gives us the answer. Notice how the angel responds to Zechariah’s question and doubts: “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and tell you this good news. 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 proper time” (NIV, 1:19-20).

A few verses later we read, “After those days, his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion” (1:24).

The Spiritual Disciplines of Silence and Solitude help us to prepare for the coming of the Lord. In essence, the angel tells Zechariah, “Just wait. Be quiet for a while and watch God work.” God breaks through even the greatest of human barriers in new, surprising, and unexpected ways. The sign of silence is a pointer to the major lesson of this passage: God will bring His promise to pass. God will perform His word. Zechariah must stop his compulsive doing, even stop speaking and listen to God and trust that He will do what He has promised.

Some people may think that Zechariah’s imposed silence is a punishment, but I think it is God’s gracious gift to Zechariah, helping him to learn to trust God, which is what Zechariah wanted. He just wasn’t ready.

Silence and solitude are gifts God wants to give us, too. Silence is more than the absence of speech and sound. Robert Mulholland, Jr., writes, “The practice of silence is the radical reversal of our cultural tendencies. Silence is bringing ourselves to a point of relinquishing to God our control of our relationship with God. Silence is a reversal of the whole possessing,
controlling, grasping dynamic of trying to maintain control of our own existence. Silence is the inner act of letting go.”

In her book, *Silence and Solitude*, Ruth Haley Barton writes, “I believe that silence is the most challenging, the most needed, and the least experienced spiritual discipline among evangelical Christians today. It is much easier to talk about it and read about it than to actually become quiet. We are a very busy, wordy and heady faith tradition. Yet we are desperate to find ways to open ourselves to our God who is, in the end, beyond all of our human constructs and human agendas. With all of our emphasis on theology and Word, cognition and service—and as important as these are—we are starved for mystery, to know this God as One who is totally Other and to experience reverence in his presence. We are starved for intimacy, to see and feel and know God in the very cells of our being. We are starved for rest, to know God beyond what we can do for him. We are starved for quiet, to hear the sound of sheer silence that is the presence of God himself.”

Zechariah needed the discipline of silence to help him quiet his soul and to prepare for the coming of the Lord. We need it, too. Usually it’s not imposed on us; we have to choose it.

Elizabeth enjoyed the discipline of solitude as she remained in seclusion for five months. Dallas Willard writes, “In solitude, we find the perspective from which we can see the things that trap, worry, and oppress us, and we confront our own soul with its forces and conflicts that escape our attention when we are interacting with others.” In short, solitude allows us the space to be who we really are with God and to confront the reality of our lives. Solitude provides the freedom to be alone, not in order to be away from people but in order to hear the divine Whisper better.

Both Elizabeth and Zechariah recognize what God has done for them. When Elizabeth conceives, she says, “The Lord has done this for me….In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people” (1:25). Elizabeth recognized God’s hand in her changing circumstances and gave God the glory.
When John is born and named, Zechariah is able to speak again. He says, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people” (1:68). This is the beginning of Zechariah’s song. It is one of the most beautiful songs in all of scripture, so I encourage you to read and meditate on the entirety of it this week.

As you do, you will discover that the fruit of silence and solitude is a deeper dependence on and devotion to God. The waiting in silence and solitude changed Zechariah as his knowledge of God moved from his head to his heart and soul. He recognized the ways his own life circumstances were part of God’s story and redemptive plan, and he is in wonder and awe at the greatness and glory of God.

During Advent, in this darkest time of the year, we are invited to face the darkness, literally and figuratively, as we light candles and recognize the divine declarations of prophecies like Isaiah 9:2: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” December is a busy month with lots of activity, but I want to encourage you to observe this season of Advent intentionally. Don’t miss out on this season of preparation. Get ready for the coming of the Lord:

- Set aside time for silence and solitude this Advent season. Get up early when it is still dark and your house is quiet. Notice what is happening inside you and in your relationship with God. Dare to name the darkness but don’t stop there.
- Name your deepest desire. How do you need God to come to you and do what only he can do?
- Wait, watch, and pray for God to come to you. Remember that Jesus is the Light of the World and he has already come. Trust he will continue to come in new, surprising, and unexpected ways.

Let me close with Ann Weem’s Advent poem “The Coming of God:”
Our God is One who comes to us
   in a burning bush,
   in an angel song,
   in a new born child.
Our God is the One who cannot be found
   locked in the church,
not even in the sanctuary.
Our God will be where God will be
   with no constraints,
   no predictability.
Our God will be born where God will be born,
   but there is no place to look for the One who comes to us.
When God is ready
   God will come
   Even to a godforsaken place
   like a stable in Bethlehem.
   Watch...
   For you know not when
   God comes.
Watch that you might be found
   Whenever,
   wherever
   God comes.