

THE COUPLE WHO EXPECTED THE UNEXPECTED

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

While I was in college I worked a number of interesting jobs—from painting to picking up bodies for a mortuary college. One place I enjoyed working was as a security guard / doorman for Rokeby Condominiums. Rokeby was an exclusive condominium. Everyone who lived there were at least millionaires. Most of the people were incredibly nice. A few were snobs.

Many of the residents were retired. One of the nicest couples who lived there was Mr. and Mrs. Loser. Mr. Loser was a well-respected, retired judge in Nashville. When I met them they were both in their 90s, but still enjoyed very active lifestyles. They were always together. They were always holding hands. It was obvious they loved each other deeply.

One day when I went to work I was told Mr. Loser had died. He was 98 years old. At some point during my shift, Mrs. Loser came into the lobby. I hugged her and told her I was praying for her. She was obviously sad, but when she started talking about her husband, she still managed to smile. And then she told me something that I don't think I will ever hear again. She told me that if Mr. Loser could have lived just another month or two, they would have celebrated their 80th wedding anniversary. Eighty years! That's the longest I have ever heard anyone being married. The real miracle, I guess, wasn't being married that long, but after being married that long, she still had a sparkle in her eye when she talked about him! Their commitment to each other really made an impact on this 19 year old college student.

Rejoicing in Hope¹

Our 2007 Advent theme is “Rejoicing in Hope,” and comes from Paul’s words in Romans 12:12, where he says, “Be joyful in hope.” The Christians in Rome, to whom Paul was writing, were living through some very difficult times and had no reason to either hope or rejoice, but Paul commands them to do so none-the-less. I know it sounds “cheesie,” but a world without hope is a hopeless world.

The word “Advent” comes from the Latin word for “coming.” In the Christian calendar, the Advent season is the time before Christmas where we prepare for the coming of Jesus in the manger, as well as remind ourselves that He is coming again. Both His first coming, and His second coming, is the coming of *hope*. Thus, over the next four weeks I want us to look into the “stories of what God did through the lives of ordinary people who became central characters in the Christmas story, so that we can practice living in what God has done and is doing to bring hope to this world.”²

Zechariah and Elizabeth

Today’s lesson comes from a married couple, who I imagine, would have looked a lot like Mr. and Mrs. Loser. The Bible doesn’t say just how old they were (or for how long they had been married), but Luke does tell us, “In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of

¹ This series of sermons is based on a devotional booklet titled *Rejoicing in Hope*, written by James A. Harnish, published in 2007 by Abingdon press.

² *Rejoicing in Hope*, p. 9.

God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. *But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.*³

Literally, the phrase, "well along in years" reads, "had gone far in their days." In other words, they were old as dirt, well past the normal age of childbearing.

The word "barren" is a hard word. The Greek word being translated is *steiros*, meaning "hard" and "stiff." It's a cold word, coming from another word that means "immoveable." *Steiros* is where we get our English word, "sterile." One of the great injustices of life (about which I intend to ask God some very direct questions when I get to heaven!) is why so many people who would make marvelous parents have such a difficult time conceiving, while so many who are obviously lousy at the job conceive like rabbits. Watching people who want to have a child, not be able to have a child, is tough. For Zechariah and Elizabeth, not being able to conceive was more than tough, it was heartbreaking.

In their culture, having children was a status, not having children was a stigma. Some believed that when a couple was not able to conceive it was because of God's judgment in their life for a wrongdoing. This is one reason why Luke goes into great detail telling us about the faith, integrity, and righteousness of Zechariah and Elizabeth. The fact they were childless was a tragedy because they wanted children, would have been wonderful parents, and they were "upright in the sight of God."

But in the Bible, *barrenness* is more than the biological inability to conceive. It is also a metaphor for *spiritual* barrenness.

It's the *coldness* of people who are unable to conceive of life the way God envisions it.

³ Luke 1:5-7

It's the *emptiness* of people who are unable to imagine the possibility of new life as a miraculous gift from God.

It's the *sterility* of people who confine all reality within the narrow limitations of our human intellect, resources, and powers.

It's the *infertility* of people who have no conception of the possibility that they could give birth to hope in someone else.

It's the *frigidity* of people who settle for this world the way it is because they cannot believe that by God's power it could be different.

Barrenness is the condition of our lives and our world when we live as if there is no listening God to hear our prayers, no life-giving God bringing new possibilities to birth, no redemptive God who might actually be at work in human history to transform the kingdoms of this earth into the kingdom of our God and to shape our lives into the likeness of Jesus Christ. ***Barenness is the biblical description of a life without hope.***

I wonder if there were days when Zechariah and Elizabeth felt like their prayers were as barren as Elizabeth's womb. I wonder if they experienced long, dark nights when they feared that the God to whom they prayed was incapable of intersecting human experience and changing the barrenness of their lives. I wonder if they ever doubted, or if they ever gave up hope.

I wonder if you have ever had days like that. I bet you have. I know I have. I wonder how many of us would confess that one of our deepest frustrations in life is that we sometimes feel as if all our praying, hoping, and working for a better life and a more peaceful world are nothing more than "visions of sugarplums" dancing in our heads. We

make our stumbling attempts at spiritual disciplines, but sometimes we're not at all sure that it makes a tangible difference. Sometimes it feels as if God has taken an extended vacation and isn't expected to return to work any time soon.

Here are two questions that are hard, cold, and yes, barren: ***How do you stay strong when God seems absent? When does hope that things will get better become nothing more than a denial of how things really are?*** I think the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth help to answer those questions.

The Absence of God

How many times have you heard someone say, "It always gets worse before it gets better"? Or, "It's always darkest just before dawn"? Have you ever wanted to strangle someone when they have said that to you? However, though we hate to admit it, *just when we think God is the most absent, the unexpected happens!*

Zechariah, who was a priest, was taking his turn serving in the Temple. He placed the incense on the altar, and its pungent aroma burned into his old, deteriorating, lungs. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared and scared the living daylight out of him. Luke could hardly use stronger language: "he was startled and was gripped with fear."⁴

Don't skip over Zechariah's fear. We can set aside the Christmas cards with chubby little cherubs playing on puffy white clouds, or satin-gowned angels that look like Miss. America with wings fluttering down from the sky. But the truth is, every time, and

⁴ Luke 1:12. The entire story is found in vv. 8-25.

anytime, God shows up in our presence, it should fill us with awe and fear. The single most repeated phrase in the entire Christmas story is “Do not be afraid.”⁵

The angel announced the most unexpected news Zechariah had ever heard: “Your prayer has been heard. You wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and a delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord...he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth...And he will go on before the Lord...to turn the hearts of fathers and their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to *make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*”⁶

This unexpected fulfillment of a long-held hope was such a shock to Zechariah’s system that it left him speechless, literally.⁷ Nine months went by. The baby was born. When it came time to name the child, Zechariah got his voice back and burst into song, concluding with this powerful image: “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.”⁸

What a wonderful picture of the gift of hope that goes deeper, reaches farther, and lasts longer than any of the temporary gifts we receive under the tree!

Hope that God will do something in the future that fulfills God’s promise in the past.

Hope that we will be saved from all the forces that contradict the saving purpose of God in our lives.

⁵ Luke 2:13; and others.

⁶ Luke 2:13-17. *Italics* are used to emphasize John’s role in going before Jesus.

⁷ Luke 1:18-20

⁸ Luke 1:78-79

Hope that will energize us to serve God without fear.

Hope for the gift of salvation and the forgiveness of our sins.

Hope for the light of eternal life to break the dark shadow of death.

Hope for the coming of One who will guide this violence-addicted, war-torn world into the way of peace.

Keep Hope Alive

A spiritually searching disciple came to the wise old teacher and asked, “What can I do to experience the presence of God?” The teacher responded with a question, just the way wise teachers always do: “What can you do to make the sun rise?” The disciple gave the obvious answer, “Nothing.” The teacher was silent, so the disciple pursued with another question: “Then why do you keep teaching us the spiritual disciplines of study and prayer?” “Ah,” the teacher said, “that’s so you will be awake when the sun rises.”

Hope is a gift. We can’t create it on our own any more than Zechariah could have created the child in Elizabeth’s womb. We can’t make it happen any more that we can make the sun rise. But we can prepare ourselves to receive God’s gift of hope. We can stay strong when God seems absent. We can keep hope from turning into denial. We can train ourselves to be awake when the sun rises. How? Zechariah models the way for us.

1. Soak your life in Scripture.

It is obvious from the content of Zechariah's song that his life was soaked in Scripture. The gift of hope came out of his lifelong discipline of listening for God to speak through the written word. The Psalmist said, "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord (*word of the Lord*), and on His law he meditates day and night."⁹

2. Make worship a top priority in your life.

Regardless of the situation around him, regardless of how he felt at the moment, and regardless of how far away God seemed, Zechariah placed a high priority on worshipping God in His Temple. Don't miss this important fact: *It is no accident or coincidence that the angel of the Lord appeared to him in the Temple.* I can't promise that you will see an angel every time you gather for worship; but I can promise you that if you aren't in worship, you won't experience the angel when he comes. We hear a lot about "praise and worship" these days. The simple truth is that the best time to give God praise is when things are not going to well, and the best time to worship is when you are about to give up hope.

If you have ever visited old cathedrals, or seen pictures of them, you've noticed all kinds of horrible looking creatures hanging around the outside of the building. What business to demonic beings have on places meant for worship?

⁹ Psalm 1:1-2. Parenthesis added for meaning and emphasis.

Placing them there was the church's way of saying that when we gather to worship God, demons flee.

3. Recognize the importance and benefit of silence.

Zechariah was speechless for 9 months. That's hard for most of us to imagine! Our lives are cluttered with noise, from the wraparound sound in our cars to the iPods in our ears. But biblical hope is shaped within us when we practice the spiritual discipline of silence; and silence involves, not only not speaking, but also listening, listening to the still small voice of God.

Evidently, when Zechariah lost his ability to speak, his other senses were sharpened, particularly his sense of sight. Zechariah could see what other people couldn't see. He could see the surprising way in which the mercy of God would break into human history. He could see the way his son, John, would prepare the way for the coming of the One who could guide us into the way of peace. He could see the unexpected hope that would soon be born. He was fully awake to see the Son rise.

CONCLUSION

Do you remember what the night before Christmas was like when you were a child? The anticipation. The hope. The excitement. Were you ever disappointed? Were you ever let down?

Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up hope of ever having a child. Time and again they had been disappointed. Their prayer had not been answered, and it seemed it would never be answered. After all, “they were both well along in years.”

They may have given up hope on themselves, but they never gave up hope on God. And when they least expected it, God showed up. And because they had practiced the spiritual disciplines of reading the Bible, worshiping, and silence, when God did show up, they were awake and waiting.

What insurmountable circumstance are you facing? Are you at the end of your rope? Are you just about ready to give up hope? Does God seem absent? Keep believing. Hang on a little while longer. Don't give up hope. Keep yourself in the Word. Make worship a top priority. Get silent and listen. Just when you least expect it, God is going to show up and do what He has promised.