

Sermon – Zechariah’s Song
Sunday December 6, 2020

How many of you are feeling disappointed this season?

Just this past week, our oldest daughter Abigail turned 13! My wife Joanne loves throwing big parties! Originally, we planned to rent space at Cornerstone Centre and throw a huge party!

There was going to be music, speeches and lots of food! But because of the pandemic, we couldn’t do that. It’s not the biggest problem in the world, but it was still disappointing.

What disappointments are you facing? Type it into the chat.

- Maybe you miss seeing your family and friends.
- Maybe you had to cancel a vacation you were looking forward to.
- Maybe you couldn’t go to your commencement ceremony.

What do you do when you’re disappointed in life?

- It might be a loved one who’s really sick.
- It might be a family member struggling with mental health.
- It might be a marriage that’s on the rocks.

How do you hope this Christmas season when there’s so much disappointment?

For some of you, if you’re honest, you don’t know how much more you can take. Just when you think you’ve hit rock bottom, there’s a new low. And you’re exhausted.

What do you do when you’re discouraged and close to losing hope?

We’re in a series called *Songs of Christmas*. We’re looking at the biblical songs of Christmas praise from the early chapters of Luke’s gospel. Our prayer is that God will stir in your heart a fresh sense of hope and wonder as we look at the meaning of Christmas.

This series will lead up to our special Online Candlelight Service. You can watch it on December 20th and 24th at 5pm. Even though we can’t gather in-person together this Christmas Eve, our Candlelight Service will still be a rich and powerful celebration.

So what we want *you* to do is invite your family and friends. This is going to be a special time and you don’t want them to miss out. All you need to do is go to our webpage and use any of the five buttons to share this with them.

I also want to highlight our Blue Christmas service on December 17th. 2020 has been such a hard year! Our Blue Christmas service is a space to acknowledge our losses, disappointments, and pain. As we grieve and journey together, we can remember that we’re not alone, that God is with us.

So if that’s what you need or you know someone who may be hurting, we hope you’ll join us and that you’ll invite a friend. You can find all the information on our webpage.

Last week we looked at the Song of Mary. Today we're going to look at the Song of Zechariah. Zechariah's story takes place even before Mary's story in Luke's gospel. So who is Zechariah?

Luke chapter 1, verse 5:

When Herod was king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah. He was a member of the priestly order of Abijah, and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. ⁶ Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. (Luke 1:5-6, NLT)

Zechariah is an ordinary person. He's a priest and a godly man.

But he lives with deep pain and disappointment. He experiences this at two levels.

First, he knows pain of living in a broken world. For 700 years, Israel has been in a downward spiral. The kingdom had split in two and was eventually conquered. Israel had lost its freedom and independence. It's changed hands over 25 times. And now the Romans are in charge. This was a great source of national shame.

You and I also know the pain of living in a broken world. We've had to deal with the pandemic, racial injustice, divisive politics, hurricanes and natural disasters.

But on top of the national pain, Zechariah also carries a private pain.

Luke says.

They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old. (v. 7)

In our culture, there's a lot of pain around infertility. Many of you know about this. Infertility is always painful. But in that culture, it was even worse. In those days, if you couldn't have children, it was believed that God was punishing you for your sin. That's why there's so much disgrace and shame in the Bible around barrenness.

How long did Zechariah carry this pain? We're not told the number of years, but we are told that it was a very long time. Luke says that Zechariah and Elizabeth aren't just old, they're *very* old. They've carried around this pain not just for years, but for decades.

Many of you have been carrying a private pain for a long time.

- Maybe it's infertility.
- Maybe it's a broken relationship.
- Maybe it's a trauma from childhood

But one day while Zechariah is serving in the temple, an angel tells him, You're going to have a son.

"God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. ¹⁴ You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord... he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ He will be a

man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children,^[c] and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.” (vv. 13-17)

This is the moment Zechariah had been praying for for decades. To have a son to love and to raise.

This is also the moment that Israel had been praying for for centuries. To reclaim their independence on the world stage. In fact, the last time God spoke, it was 400 years ago.

The prophet Malachi gave this prophecy.

Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the LORD arrives. ⁶ His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. (Malachi 4:5)

So how does that relate to this story?

God is telling Zechariah that not only will he have a son, but this son will become John the Baptist, the prophet Malachi prophesied about 400 years ago. The one who will turn the people back to God. The one who will prepare the way for God’s Messiah. The one Jesus himself said was the greatest man who ever lived!

So how does Zechariah, this righteous man of God respond?

Verse 18: “How can I be sure this will happen? I’m an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years.”

For whatever reason, Zechariah doesn’t believe God. He believes *in* God. He goes to church, he knows the word, he serves faithfully.

But somewhere down the line he lost his hope. He lost hope that God could do a miracle. He lost hope that God was bigger than his pain. He lost hope that God could give him a new future.

I wonder, how many of you have lost hope in this season?

What I love about this story is that not only does God give Zechariah a son. But he also gives him back his hope. How does he do that?

The angel says,

since you didn’t believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born... (v. 20)

In other words, for nine months, Zechariah is silent and unable to speak. Now how many of you wish that someone in your life was silent and unable to speak?

It reminds me of the Simpsons. In one episode, Homer smashes his face into a statue breaking his jaw. He has to get it wired shut leaving him unable to speak.

But during this time, Homer has to do something he's hasn't done in a long time - *listen*. Truly listen. So he listens to his family, to their hopes and dreams, to their thoughts and feelings.

And through this process, Homer has a spiritual transformation. He learns compassion and wisdom. He learns patience and the ability to see things from someone else's perspective.

During the nine months of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Zechariah has a transformation. In his silence, he learns to listen. To truly listen to God. He reflects on his life. He thinks about his pain. He learns to see things from another perspective.

Silence has a way of recalibrating our hearts. It helps filter out the noise, it helps us see what's most important, it replenishes our soul.

The truth is, there are some things you can only know in silence. That's why the psalmist says, *Be still and know that I am God.*

Zechariah was a righteous man. But his righteousness couldn't sustain him. Only God can do that. You see, Zechariah's silence wasn't a punishment, it was a gift. God was preparing to do a deep work in him.

At the end of this time, when his son is finally born, Zechariah pours out a beautiful song of praise. It comes out of nine months of silence. It comes out of the deep work God has done in his heart.

So now that you know the background, let's look at Zechariah's Song.

Praise the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has visited and redeemed his people.

⁶⁹ He has sent us a mighty Savior^[h]
from the royal line of his servant David,
⁷⁰ just as he promised
through his holy prophets long ago.

⁷¹ Now we will be saved from our enemies
and from all who hate us.

⁷² He has been merciful to our ancestors
by remembering his sacred covenant—

⁷³ the covenant he swore with an oath
to our ancestor Abraham.

⁷⁴ We have been rescued from our enemies
so we can serve God without fear,

⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
for as long as we live. (vv. 68-75)

We're going to look at two themes in this song. Two themes that will give you hope in your pain and disappointment. You can meditate and pray over them. You can turn them into breath prayers.

The first theme is this. **God is still on the throne!**

Type that in the chat: God is still on the throne!

In Zechariah's day, who was the most powerful man in the world? Caesar. The Jews were living under his rule. This was a reminder that all was *not* right in the world.

After all, God had promised Abraham to make him into a great nation.

But God tells gives Zechariah that he's about to do a new thing. How many of you believe that God is about to do a new thing in your life? If you do, type into the chat: God's about to do a new thing!

Verse 69: He has sent us a mighty Savior... we will be saved from our enemies and from all who hate us.

In other words, although things look really bad right now, hope is coming. God is sending a saviour. Even though Caesar might be Emperor, God is sitting on the throne.

How many of us need that reminder today? Just a month ago, the U.S. held its presidential elections... I'm not sure if any of you noticed that. Many people believed that if a certain candidate won, the country would be ruined. Many people believed that if the other candidate won, the country would be ruined.

The truth is, we don't know what will happen to the U.S. We don't know what will happen with the pandemic. But we do know that regardless of who's in office or how the curve is going - God is still on his throne.

God is still in control. And God is still moving history towards his intended purposes.

That's why Paul says,

he makes everything work out according to his plan. (Ephesians 1:11)

And this has greater significance than even Zechariah realized.

Because Zechariah thought that God's Saviour was coming to overthrow Rome and liberate Israel. What he didn't realize was that Jesus was coming not just for Israel but for the world. He was coming not to confront political enemies but spiritual ones, the cosmic forces that enslave the human race.

In fact, on the cross Jesus has won the war. And although the Enemy is defeated, he's still wreaking havoc in this world. Wherever there's injustice, oppression and division Satan is working to attack God's plans and his people.

We don't know when Satan will finally meet his ultimate doom, but we do know that until then, Jesus will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail. One day, the King of Kings and Lord of lords will return to set everything right. And on that day, the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord Jesus, who will reign on his throne forever.

That's our hope! If you agree with that, type Amen in the chat. Because God is still on the throne.

The second theme in the song is that **God keeps his promises**.

It's been 2,000 years since God promised to bless Abraham. It's been 700 years since God promised to send a King. It's been 400 years since God last spoke.

But Zechariah says this.

Verse 69: He has sent us a mighty Savior from the royal line of his servant David, **just as he promised** through his holy prophets long ago... He has been merciful to our ancestors by **remembering his sacred covenant**—the covenant he swore with an oath to our ancestor Abraham.

In other words, God keeps his promises.

400 years is a long time to wait. It's a long time to wonder, has God forgotten about me? Does he even remember his promises?

What was God doing during those 400 years?

Historians point out that Jesus actually came at the perfect moment in history.

Why? Because 400 years prior, Alexander the Great came into power. He loved Greek culture and wanted to spread the culture and language throughout the world.

Later, Rome came into power. They needed a network of roads so that messengers and armies could travel.

So what does all this have to do with Christmas? It means that when Jesus came and commissioned his disciples to go into the world to make disciples of all nations, God had already put things in place.

Because Greek was the universal language, people could understand the gospel.

Because of the network of roads, Christians could reach people everywhere.

Historian Kenneth Latourette writes:

One of the most amazing and significant facts of history is that within five centuries of its birth Christianity won the professed allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the population of the Roman Empire.

God's timing is always perfect. Paul puts it like this:

But when the *right time* came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. (Galatians 4:4)

Why is this significant? It's significant because what may seem like God's silence, may in fact be God's preparation. What may seem like God forgetting his promises, may in fact be God getting ready for his plan.

God timing is always perfect.

So don't think that just because God is silent that he doesn't care. God's silence may be preparing you for something new.

- Maybe some of your plans fell through this year and your heartbroken. But maybe God is helping you see some new opportunities.
- Maybe you're dealing with a challenging relationship. But maybe God is using it to grow your love and patience.
- Maybe you're discouraged and overwhelmed. But maybe God is calling you to deepen your faith in him.

Even when life is hard and it feels like God is silent we can remember that

... God causes everything to work together^[a] for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. (Romans 8:28)

God keeps his promises.

Zechariah was a righteous man who loved God. But over time, he lost hope. There was too much pain in the world and in his life. So God gives him the gift of silence to help him filter out the noise and see what's really important.

As you figure out new routines and new ways to connect with people this Christmas, take time to be silent so that you can filter out the noise and see what's really important. And remember that God is still on the throne and God keeps his promises.

Communion

At this time, we're going to celebrate Communion. If you're watching live, I trust that you have your elements ready so you can participate at home.

Zechariah's story is a reminder that we live with both the pain from the world and the pain from our lives. And the truth is, our righteousness can't sustain us. Our good works can't sustain us. Only Jesus can sustain us.

And so he invites us to commune with him so that we can sit in his presence and receive all that he wants to give us.

Communion is a way we do that. It's a time to celebrate the fellowship we have with God that was made possible only by Jesus through his death on the cross – where his body was broken for us and his blood was shed for us.

Two themes that come out of Zechariah's time of silence are God is still on the throne and God keeps his promises. Would you eat and drink prayerfully today and consider how God might be speaking to you through these themes?

Because on the night he was betrayed...