

Britt Carlson
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11 o'clock am

Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, Washington

"Songs for a Savior: The Song of Zechariah"

Luke 1:5-25; 58-59,

Well, Community Church of Issaquah, our first official Sunday together as we begin this journey of me being your interim pastor. While I've been unpacking boxes of books and starting to settle into life here with you this week, I've been thinking about the nature of an "interim." Interim times are in between times. Times that aren't quite this and aren't quite that. Times that fall in the middle. Interims are times of waiting as God moves us from one chapter to the next.

[Pause]

And what more appropriate time could there be to begin such phase in our lives together than Advent. Advent is the four Sundays a year that Christians set aside to wait and prepare for the birth of our Savior, Jesus. It's the season when we wait between God's word of promise to us and the promise's fulfillment. Advent is our yearly interim time.

And today, as we begin to prepare for the coming of the Lord, Luke gives us a story about two people who are in an interim time themselves.

Zechariah is a priest, and his wife, Elizabeth is descended from the priestly family of Aaron. Now in ancient near eastern culture, such a lineage would have been highly esteemed because of Zechariah's ability to enter the inner courts of the temple as a part of his priestly vocation. They both would have enjoyed a respect and social status that the majority of Israelites would not have.

But I should say, they *normally* would have had respect. However, Luke then adds something very telling about Zechariah and Elizabeth: Elizabeth is barren. You see in those days, one of the most sure signs that you were blessed of God

was an abundance of children. And it's an easy **mental leap** for most people to switch that equation around and say that if you are not able to have children then you're not blessed of God. That inability would have changed their status in the community from respected and sought out to one more on the outside.

Just imagine what it would have been like for Elizabeth—living in a society that thought a woman's role and worth was in her children—to watch her friends begin to have children, and then watching those children grow up, and then seeing those children have their own children...all the while being left out of the shared trials and joy and everyday life that mothers have. Her life has been a season of waiting with no end in sight. Hope for God's intervention had probably faded for her a long time ago.

But then God's word comes by way of the angel Gabriel. A child will be born to Elizabeth and Zechariah, he declares. Their lives as they know it are going to change. But as we all know, babies don't just spring out of cabbage patches. There is that nine plus month waiting period. There is an in-between time from the announcement to the fulfillment. There is an interim.

And this is where we have something to learn. You see, in Zechariah and Elizabeth we have two paths of responding to God's word to us. We have two different models of what we do when God's good news comes to us, and yet there is still some waiting left to do.

First we learn of Zechariah's path. He—like Elizabeth—is righteous, and God is pleased with him. But when Gabriel announces the good news

that his prayers are going to be answered, what is his response? He says, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” Zechariah wants a sign. He needs more supporting evidence before he can rejoice in what God is doing. He wants to know that he knows that he will have a son.

Some of us are like Zechariah. Instead of pondering things in our hearts with awe [*Pause*] like Mary [*Pause*], we want certainty, security in our knowledge. We want to know that we know that we know. Instead of waiting those long nine months as God’s word slowly reaches fulfillment in John’s birth, we want all of the genetic tests taken and all of the ultrasounds updates as soon as we can possibly get them. We want a sign at the very beginning that takes away all of the tension of that waiting period.

You know, it’s not a bad thing to wonder at how God’s word can come true. The Lord’s promises frankly often seem impossible to be fulfilled, and both Mary and Zechariah point out the big gap between God’s word coming to pass and the reality of their lives. Mary wonders, “How can this be for I am virgin,” while Zechariah points out that he is an old and Elizabeth isn’t that young herself. It’s not wrong to acknowledge reality.

But the mistake that Zechariah makes and we can make is to try to shrink that waiting period down by getting proof. It’s the attempt to get around what faith is: the assurance of things *hoped for*, the conviction of things *not seen*. It’s trying to get around the truth that God makes everything beautiful *in its time*.

A few months ago I was at a lecture by a professor who teaches piano at Cambridge and divinity at Duke, and he was talking about how music can help us understand our Christian life. He was describing how most of Western music works by building up tensions and resolving them. Our music makes you expect certain

sounds that will resolve the tension that has built up. [*Sing slower*] *Mary had a little lamb, whose fleece was white as...snow*. What this professor pointed out was that for tension to build, for music to be interesting, and for there to be sonic resolution at all, there has to be pauses between some of the notes. And then he said something really interesting. He said, “Just because there’s no sound, it doesn’t mean the waiting is empty or void.”

What a word for advent. The pauses between the notes of our lives don’t have to be empty or void. The places that seem silent in our lives, where we feel the Lord’s absence the most, can still be filled with God’s action—even if we don’t see it.

It makes sense that Advent can be a season when many of us sense those silences most acutely. Popular culture teaches us that Christmas is when we should be merry and bright and everything should be gift-wrapped and glistening in our worlds. But the period of Advent for us as Christians teaches us something else. It affirms the fact that there is still a lot of waiting in this world. Times of missing those who we have loved and long to be with. Times of remembering seasons of life that are no more. Times of grieving lost dreams. And yet even in those times of silence in our lives, Advent also says with the angel Gabriel, “Do not be afraid. Your prayer has been heard. God is working in the interim.”

This is what I want us to remember as we sing our Christmas songs in the coming weeks. I want us to remember what that professor went on to say, that “Music can remind us that when nothing seems to be happening, God is still at work, that his promises still stand. The final resolutions of God’s promises are still to come, and we need to sense that, even when nothing seems to be going on.”¹

¹ Jeremy Begbie: What can we learn about the gospel from music? Faith and Leadership blog.

Now if the first way is Zechariah's attempt to skip over the silence, this is the second way. This is the way of Elizabeth. Elizabeth recognized the music of God's song and wasn't trying to rush through to the end. She savored every note and didn't try to avoid the silent times. Luke tells us that for five months after she conceived, Elizabeth went into seclusion. Biblical commentators don't really know what to make of this aside, but I wonder if Elizabeth going into seclusion was a way of her honoring the silence between the promise and the attainment.

What a difference between Elizabeth's expectant waiting and Zechariah's response to Gabriel. Zechariah's lack of faith is like rushing through a pause on a musical score. It doesn't wreck the piece, but it stops you from feeling the full weight of the movement of the music. Lack of faith prevents you from enjoying the drama of what God is up to. Of receiving the joy of what God is doing even as the tension builds.

This is the hard work we must try to do. To try not to rush through the music God is playing in our lives. To hear what God is doing even in the silence.

But there's something I want us to note about the story of Zechariah. What is the end result? Zechariah holding his newborn son in his arms. And who breaks out into a song of praise and prophecy? Zechariah! The Lord doesn't take away his promise because Zechariah has little faith. It's actually only very secondarily about Zechariah's faith at all. What all of this is really about is God's faithfulness. Remember Zechariah is pleasing to God. He's righteous. His lack of faith doesn't stop God's faithfulness. There is no punishment. There is only the pleasure of receiving what you what thought was impossible.

That's not to say that there isn't a difference between the way of Zechariah and the way of

Elizabeth. It's just that the difference is only that Elizabeth got to enter into God's joy *earlier*. She received the joy of God's good news while Zechariah was still trying to figure out if he had enough proof to believe.

As we ourselves enter into this interim time, this is what I want: I want us to enjoy the music that God is playing *as early as possible*. I want us to receive this good time with joy like Elizabeth and not try to secure the future like Zechariah. Because this is what this whole season is about. In fact, this is what the whole Christian life is about! Receiving the joy of God's faithfulness to us in Jesus Christ.

So Community Church of Issaquah, as we look to the months ahead, let us let joy be the mark of our lives. Let us follow the way of Elizabeth and receive God's word to us as it soon as it comes to us. But let us also rest in God's promise that even if it takes us a while to catch on, even if we rush our pauses and our rhythm isn't perfect, God is faithful and our arms will be filled with the fullness of God's goodness to us. Amen.