

ZECHARIAH HEARS FROM GOD

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:5–23

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

The angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.”

(Luke 1:13)

| Daily Bible Readings | | | |
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| M | Nov. 28 | John 10:22–30 | My Sheep Hear My Voice |
| T | Nov. 29 | John 16:1–15 | Guided by the Spirit |
| W | Nov. 30 | Isa. 30:18–26 | God Will Rise Up with Mercy |
| Th | Dec. 1 | Ps. 103:1–12 | Recounting God’s Goodness |
| F | Dec. 2 | Ps. 103:13–22 | God’s Everlasting Love |
| Sa | Dec. 3 | Luke 1:5–17 | Zechariah’s Prayer Is Answered |

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Do you know anyone who seems to have it all? Someone may have the perfect job, the most impressive house, the most fun life-partner and be living a life deep in rich purpose. And yet, life is not always as perfect for “the Joneses” as it may seem. We often idolize the lives of others without really understanding their struggles. Moreover, we may attempt to present our lives, especially on social media, as meaningful and enviable by airbrushing away unpleasant details and daily frustrations.

The truth is that life is full of confusion and disappointment. “I worked so hard, why did I not get that promotion?” “Why did that congregation seem to die? It always seemed so full of life?” “Why did God let her get sick? She was always so kind and loving to everyone?” If we are honest, sometimes we are so experienced at feeling disappointment that hope feels a bit *too* miraculous. We try to protect our hearts from thinking our wildest dreams might actually happen by tamping down our dreams and filling our lives with skepticism.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is a story about people who had everything, except exactly what they wanted. When Gabriel spoke to the old priest, his words seemed too good to be true, not to be believed without some supporting sign. God granted more than a sign; soon an elderly couple

held the baby that they had been longing for across several decades. The beginning of the Gospel according to Luke is full of tales of worn out and all-but-forgotten hopes being realized.

Gracious God, you know our weary years and our silent tears. You know how our hearts have longed for hope, but at the same time been afraid of being disappointed. Help us to hope in you and to trust in the works of your mighty hand, which is strong to save.



SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:8–20

1:8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹[Zechariah] was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” ¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” ¹⁹The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

OLD PRIEST, OLD HOPES

From the beginning of Luke's account of the gospel, the careful reader finds old patterns being set up. A man from the tribe of Levi was married to a woman who was also from the tribe of Levi. Is this Amran and Jocheved, Moses' parents? In this case it was Zechariah and Elizabeth. We read about a woman unable to bear children. Was this Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, or Hannah? In this case, it was Elizabeth. The text calls to mind the ways God has provided a deliverer and children for formerly barren couples.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had waited their whole lives for a child, and maybe even for a deliverer, only to be disappointed. Indeed, Elizabeth was advanced in her days, and presumably the couple had given up on the old hopes.

Zechariah *and* Elizabeth are noted as righteous, walking blamelessly in the sight of God. And yet the accusations of Job's friends must have been constantly in their ears: "How can you really be righteous if God has allowed you to be deprived of children?" I imagine the couple's righteousness must have had a sort of public asterisk next to it. "They seem righteous, but why were they not blessed with children?" (see Luke 1:25).

But it was this old priest, when his division was called up for service, who was selected by lot—and thus understood to be selected by God—to burn incense in front of the curtain of the most holy place. God had chosen the old priest and his old wife to experience the old hopes: God would indeed give them a child, who would announce the redemption of their people.

Zechariah seems to have found his voice briefly to ask the visitor how what he had said would come to pass, noting that reproduction was out of the question for him and Elizabeth. Gabriel seems to have taken offense at this, appealing to his position in the presence of God as the reason that he should be believed. But Zechariah would have an additional proof: he would not be able to speak until the child was born.

When Zechariah emerged from the temple, it was clear to all that he had seen a vision, though what sort of vision he was unable to describe through the making of signs. Zechariah stayed in Jerusalem through the remainder of his term. But then shortly after he returned home, Zechariah and Elizabeth experienced the joy of creating new life together.

 How might any of us have reacted to having old hopes, recently extinguished, suddenly rekindled?

DIS-GRACE AND GRACE

Zechariah and Elizabeth seem like a couple whom God would choose to work with. They were both from the holy tribe of Levi. They were both righteous. They both observed the Lord's commands. And yet, they faced the social opprobrium reserved for religious people who do not seem to be blessed by God. As the years passed, and their hope for children faded, it is not difficult to imagine the couple absorbing the worldview of those who spoke of them as a disgrace. What had they done wrong? Or did God simply not care about them?

Yet rather than disgrace, God offered unbelievable grace (at least in the case of Zechariah). Imagine Zechariah's intensity as he motioned to his fellow priests that he was going to have a son. Each year, they met at the appointed time in Jerusalem. They no doubt shared stories of children and then of grandchildren added to their families every year. Every year, Zechariah knew that he would be met with pity and then exclusion as the other priests talked about how God had blessed their growing families. We can't possibly overestimate Zechariah's excitement as he tried to show his colleagues that God had blessed him too.

How did Zechariah communicate the blessing to Elizabeth? Was he able to? Zechariah seems to have been able to write (Luke 1:63), but he does not seem to have availed himself of that method of communication until after his son was born. Did Zechariah just resume normal relations with his wife and smile knowingly when the unbelievable—that Elizabeth was with child—became harder and harder to deny? We cannot know.

What we do know is that, when she became pregnant, Elizabeth's first thoughts were about grace and disgrace. Knowing about gestational and birth mortality for babies and mothers, Elizabeth was probably at best cautiously hopeful, echoing Zechariah in the temple. Elizabeth secluded herself for five months, and only received her relative, Mary, in the sixth month. All the while she looked forward to the removal of her disgrace. As Mary and Elizabeth spoke, Elizabeth came to believe that she really would have a son in her old age. When the day of their son's birth arrived, her neighbors rejoiced with Elizabeth at how her disgrace had been washed away in magnified mercy and grace (Luke 1:58).



When have you felt public disgrace? How have you overcome that feeling?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is a story of people who seemed to do everything right, and yet their lives were marred by their hopelessness at not having descendants and carrying on the family name. Our hopes are also frequently disappointed, and our sense of justice is often offended by what happens in the world. Bad things happen to good people. We need to be careful not to see that as any sort of divine disapproval. Jesus says that, sometimes, towers just fall on people, and it has more to do with engineering than with relative sinfulness or righteousness (Luke 13:4–5).

Zechariah and Elizabeth take their disappointment into themselves, it seems. Zechariah has difficulty believing that he could really become a father, even when told by an angel appearing to him in the Holy Place of the temple. Elizabeth has internalized her neighbors' conception of disgrace, and she cannot wait to shed it. And yet, she seemingly waits nine months before letting her neighbors share her joy. She does not want to get her hopes up, only for them to be crushed again.

In a recent *Avengers* movie, one of the characters, who lost his wife and children years earlier, is told that there may be a way to bring them back to life. His first response is, “Don’t give me hope!” I can hear Zechariah, Elizabeth, and myself saying, “Don’t give me hope!” after we have had to let dreams die. Yet the breaking forth of the gospel into the world is precisely the return of hope where it once was lost. It is hope for a people who feared that they were forgotten or abandoned by God. It is hope that God still cares about justice. And it is hope for an elderly couple that God wants to do the unbelievable in their lives.

The challenge is to be open to, and maybe even expectant of, how God might be offering us hope. Of course, we continue to live in a world where towers sometimes fall, and righteous people may not be able to have the children they desire.

The hope we have in Jesus, begun in our baptisms and completed in the resurrection of the dead, is that God will never leave or forsake us. Even when Zechariah and Elizabeth were old, God brought new life. God will continue to bring the old hopes to present and future realities.



Where might God be asking you to embrace hope?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. The account of the birth of John the Baptist, along with the names of his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, is unique to Luke among the canonical Gospels.
2. Priestly duties were divided among many due to the large number of priests available. That Zechariah was chosen “by lot” does not indicate chance or happenstance; rather in the ancient world it was believed that this indicated divine providence.
3. Centering the narrative in the temple is not arbitrary. This was considered the central focal point of God's presence. That only Zechariah enters the temple on this day is indicative of the holiness associated with the sanctuary of the Lord.
4. The infertility of the aged Elizabeth is a motif familiar from stories of Old Testament matriarchs (Gen. 18:11; 25:21; 30:1; 1 Sam. 1–2). The unexpected conception of John to the elderly couple foreshadows the miraculous conception of Jesus to the Virgin Mary. When the Bible calls attention to a “barren woman,” it is often a sure sign that God is about to do something wonderful.