

Advent 2022
Week 2 - The Song of Zechariah
December 4, 2022

We're in the midst of a season the church around the world has historically called, "Advent." It's a season covering the four weeks leading up to Christmas - the day Christians celebrate Jesus' birth - where we intentionally set our minds and our hearts on the wonder and beauty of Jesus' first arrival into the world as we look forward to his second.

Specifically, this year in our Gatherings, we're looking at 4 different instances of poetry, or songs, that are captured in **Luke 1-2** leading up to Jesus' birth.

Which, to be honest, I'm not a poetry guy. To me reading poetry is like looking at one of those optical illusion paintings, if i just stare at it long enough I think I get it?

But every now and again, I'll come across one, and the lightbulb will go off, and I'll go, "ohhhh, I get it. Wow, what a meaningful way to think about that."

Here's why I bring that up... **Poetry is meant to be pondered.** It's meant to be thought about, and meditated on. That probably explains why about 33% of the Bible is poetry. It forces us to wrestle with what's going on in the text. And that's basically what we're trying to do with this series. Ponder these little glimpses of God's poetry... and discern what they have to tell us about Advent - the arrival of Jesus - and what it means for us.

Today, we're going to look at one recorded in **Luke 1**. And it's not directly about Jesus, but about his cousin, John the Baptist and how it connects to Advent. So if you have a Bible we'll be in **Luke 1:67-79**.

But let's begin by reading it together, and then we'll dive in on what it has for us...

67 And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying **68** "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people **69** and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, **70** as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, **71** that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; **72** to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, **73** the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us **74** that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, **75** in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. **76** And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, **77** to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, **78** because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high **79** to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Now at first glance it seems like this is a poem about an exuberant father over the birth of his child... and it is that, but there's a lot more to it.

His son who was just born, John the Baptist, is the fulfillment of a prophecy from the Hebrew Bible, specifically Malachi 3, written some 400-500 years before this. And in that prophecy, it says that a prophet will come who will prepare the way of the Messiah.

But to understand the drama of this song, we're gonna have to do a flashback in this sermon a bit - and look at some other events... so we flash back with me here.

So, Zechariah - the father who is saying this song - was a priest married to a woman named Elizabeth. Luke tells us they were both "advanced in years". How advanced... your guess is as good as mine, but we're also told that they are unable to have children. Elizabeth is barren.

- They had no kids; in those days, there was hardly anything worse for a couple. It meant having someone to take care of you when you were older
- It also came with the assumption that God had abandoned you or that you may have done something to deserve being barren
- For years Zechariah and Elizabeth had hoped for a son. But year after year, they cycled through hope and disappointment. Perhaps this has gone on for decades now of trying to get pregnant but with no luck.
- And so, by this point, a kind of permanent disappointment has set in on them.
- Plus, with Zechariah as a priest - he's probably a well-known figure in the community, so they had to deal with all the questions people asked about them... "Oh yeah, Zechariah and Elisabeth... I wonder what is wrong with them?"

And Zechariah's story starts much like Mary's which we looked at last week. Zechariah is visited by an angel and given a message from God that despite her barrenness, and despite their age, despite the decades of disappointment, Elizabeth is going to have a son.

Luke 1:13–17 [13] But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. [14] And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, [15] for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. [16] And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, [17] and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

You'll notice some similar language to the verse Zechariah will proclaim later. But here's the hitch. At this moment, Zechariah doesn't quite buy it.

Luke 1:18

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."

Zechariah doubts. Which...makes sense. He rightly rationalizes the seeming impossibility of these things. "How could this happen? My wife can't have kids... and believe me we've tried... plus, we're old. Folks our age just don't have kids. We're buying diapers but it ain't for no babies if you know what I mean."

It's an understandable position to take. The angels gonna answer and here's where things get really interesting:

Luke 1:19-22

And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. [20] And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." [21] And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. [22] And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute.

Now, let's pause here and talk for a minute because if you were here last week, and have been a careful observer, you'll notice that on the surface it seems like Zechariah has a similar response to Mary... both ask, "How can these things be?" But to Mary the angel says "Because God sees you and He has found favor with you." (or has been given grace). To which, Mary trusts God with all and responds in the positive.

But to Zechariah, he says... "Oh you asking questions, huh? You wanna know how you'll know? You're not gonna be able to talk until the baby gets here!"

So what's going on here?

Look back at it again, and contrast Mary and Zechariah. Both have questions. Both have doubts. But each are treated differently, which means there is something underneath the surface of their doubts we're meant to see. And it's here the biblical author is actually shedding some light on the nature of doubt. Not all doubt is the same. Tim Keller, commenting on these two passages says, **"there is a kind of doubt that wants answers, and a kind of doubt that doesn't."** A kind of doubt that is genuinely curious, that has an open-mind to the possibility of what it's being told, and another kind of doubt that is closed, or cynical.

- One is a posture of wonder - that brings questions to God -
- and the other is a posture of skepticism that lodges questions at Him.

Mary's questioning that we saw last week, certainly falls into that wonder category. "Could this possibly be true?" Zechariah's though, I believe, falls into the other.

On the surface, it might look like they are asking the same thing... but underneath they come from two completely different places.

Some of you know what I'm talking about. How you can say something to someone - be it a spouse or a friend or your kid - but then put a different twist on the same words and it's interpreted differently

- Hey honey, would you mind if we watch this show tonight instead? VS. Hey honey, would *you mind* if we watch this show tonight instead?
- Son, clean up your room please. Vs SON - clean up your room - pleeeeeease!

This is the classic "it's not *what* you said... it's the *way* you said it."

Same here, that's what's going on with Zechariah and Mary. They ask virtually the same thing... it's not *what* Zechariah said that was different from Mary... but what lies behind what they said.

And before that tempts you to view him in a negative light... I want you to consider for a few moments who Zechariah is...

- For one, **he's a priest**. He's responsible for the spiritual life of the Jewish people. He is one who is allegedly supposed to know who God is... who knows how God works... who is likely to have large sections of the Hebrew Bible memorized... who is supposed to trust God at His Word and leads others to do the same.
- Second, Zechariah knows that God, at times, **blesses childless parents with a child** is sort of his MO in the OT. The most glaring example being Abraham and Sarah which we talked about last week... the patriarch of God's people... Abraham and Sarah were also "well advanced in years", close to 100, in fact, and *that's* when God brought to them a promised child.

Point is, this type of miracle is not outside the realm of who Zechariah knows God to be.

But, Zechariah also knows his current disappointment and honestly it clouds his ability to receive what God is saying to him.

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And here comes this angel... promising him the thing he's longed for, telling him that God is going to do the thing he hoped and prayed God would do... He's going to miraculously provide for him and his family...

And Zechariah's response is "Reeeally tho? You sure about that? How can that be? Please, Mr. Angel, I've lived long enough and seen enough to know that's foolishness. It might have made for good stories in the past... God might've even done it in the past for other people... but that ship has long since sailed for us. In fact, I'd appreciate it if you'd not fill my head with those sort of childish hopes and dreams. Please, I'm already disappointed so I'd appreciate you not getting my hopes up, thank you."

And all of that puts Zechariah in a spot where he knows these things about God... but he doesn't believe them for himself. He knows them, but he doesn't *truly, deeply, personally* know them for himself...

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And so, the angel causes Zechariah to remain mute, all the way up until the birth of his son, John. Which I don't know about you but for me I'm thinking why stay mute all 9 months? I would think the moment the angel shut my mouth I would think to myself, "Oh okay. Point made. We're good now. I'd like to speak again please." But that's not what God does. And it might be worth asking why? Is God punishing Zechariah's doubt? I don't think so... and here's why...because in those 9 months God gave Zechariah exactly what he needed.

I once heard a pastor say that people are deathly afraid of silence because then they'd be forced to hear their own thoughts. So most people just drown it out with TV, podcasts, music, people. Silence can be a terrifying thing because it forces you to wrestle with your inner monologue.

I wonder what those 9 months of silence looked like in Zechariah's mind. To deal with the shock of going mute. Sort of re-learning how to communicate with his friends and family. Keep in mind he's a priest, he teaches the Bible every week. Imagine what the people in his congregation would have thought when the guy who teaches every week suddenly can't speak anymore.

What would they have done in the temple? Maybe they fill up that time by doing church skits. Maybe they had the youth guy think to himself, "Now's my moment."

Think about internally what that might have been for him. To be in such doubt, and then to see your wife who you've been married to for decades upon decades, and you see her stomach slowly start to expand. You start feeling the kicks on her stomach. And in the process you realize, God is at work. God is doing something special here. Those hopes are finally coming true. And I can only imagine, when the light bulb turned on for Zechariah, what the relational intimacy he must have had with God through those 9 months.

And what I think is interesting about this whole ordeal is that while Zechariah may have doubted, and while the angel's actions may have seemed a bit harsh... ultimately, Zechariah was given exactly what he needed not just to know that God's promises were true, but to truly know the God behind them.

God actually met him in his doubt. God graciously showed him that all of this was for real.

And it's only when his baby is born is he finally able to speak again. And the very first words he utters come straight out of Scripture. It's likely that these were passages and ideas that he was meditating on for months and months on end:

Look back at those words again. Imagine for a minute you can't speak for so long. And then you see your child for the first time. You hear your baby's first cries. And all of a sudden you blurt out:

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people **69** and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, **70** as he spoke

by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, **71** that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us **72** to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, **73** the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us **74** that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, **75** in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. **76** And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, **77** to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, **78** because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high **79** to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

I mean...man, when those are the first words you've said in so long. I imagine Elizabeth right next to him with her jaw dropped. His baby stopped crying and the baby's jaw dropped. How incredible that whole experience must have been.

And for what it is worth, His words are an affirmation of what God has always said He would do... He is doing.

- In v.69 - What the prophets said of how God is raising up a horn of salvation - that's from Psalm 132...is happening
- In v.72 - How God remembers his covenant like he said he would in Lev 26...is true
- In v.73 - The oath he swore to Abraham in Genesis 15...God is fulfilling
- In v.76 - How through John the Baptist, God is raising up the prophet that will proclaim the arrival of Jesus like he said we would in Malachi 3... it's all happening right now!

You see Zechariah knew truths about God and who He is...but now at a real, experiential-heart-level, now he really knows.

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Conclusion

So what does this mean for us? I've got two things:

Advent gives assurance for the doubters.

We saw this in Mary's song last week, and we see this with Zechariah, and God deals differently with each one. Their questions and their doubts, God uses as a means to show each of them who He truly is. Those doubts and those questions ultimately lead to deeper praise.

And I think that's so helpful to tease out, especially in our day and age. We're in a time in our culture where doubt is celebrated and seen as the intellectual mountaintop. Popular culture commends doubting and deconstructing to the point that it tears down and there is nothing left, and we call it "liberating." "Skepticism" is a badge of honor. And yet when the Bible talks about questioning and doubt...there is more going on. Doubt and questions can be a totally fine thing, though it's never praised or commended. On the other hand, doubt can be a terrible thing...it depends on what is behind it. What's the heart posture behind our questions and our doubts?

- Is our doubt truly seeking answers, with an open-mind? Are we looking to God and others for truth? Are we looking to Scripture to see what it has to say? Do we have a

posture, as Anselm calls it, of “faith seeking understanding”? To say, like the man in **Mark 9**, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.”

- Or is our doubt, cynical and jaded, with a closed mind? Not looking for truth but simply looking for sources that confirm your bias, creating an echo chamber in your mind of criticism? Where you’ve been frustrated one too many times over and you’re not interested in what God and His Word has to say. And when you get to that place it can be destructive for your soul.
 - I mean, take this out of the realm of the Bible for a second: can you imagine what it would be like to have this posture in any relationship or friendship you have with another person? Where you’re constantly sitting as judge and jury over every person you know with this cynical skepticism towards them? Where you’re examining everything they do and say towards you with no charity or understanding? “Why did they say *that* to me *that* way?” What did they mean when they did this?”
 - It would be impossible to have any real depth of relationship if you’re constantly filled with closed-minded doubt towards the other. And in the process, your doubt consumes you - and makes you the center of the universe, unable to trust anyone outside of yourself. That close-mindedness prevents you from ever growing or maturing, or ever building deep, meaningful friendships because you never allow anyone else to speak into your life because you’ve become the judge over everything

Like I said, in our culture, this type of doubt is celebrated and championed.

And yet to be consistent with the nature of doubt, are we willing for a moment to doubt our doubts? To put a mirror up to ourselves and legitimately question our questions. To seek out and look for truth. To continue being in community, and following Jesus, and being open with your questions and your struggles.

Because The beauty of Advent is that through Jesus, God meets us in our doubts. The arrival of Jesus is God has come for us. He doesn't abandon us and He's not afraid of our fear or skepticism or questions or anything. In our doubts, God meets us by showing us the hope found in Jesus. And it may not necessarily mean that you are given an air-tight answer, but it does mean that when you come to God with your doubts and questions - He will reveal to you Himself - and that is most seen through the person and work of Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate answer to every question you have. Jesus actually rose from the dead - so are you going to trust God even when you don't have all your questions and doubts figured out? Are you going to trust him or not?

I think about how, when I was a kid, did you know what four words my parents would tell me over and over again that drove me crazy? Because I said so. Oh man, I thought for real when I

grew up and had kids of my own I wasn't ever gonna use that on my kids. I would patiently explain to them why we were doing the things we were doing. And my kids would rationally and calmly hear all the relevant data points and say, "Why yes father, I see your point is valid and concur with your conclusions to put my coat on because I do see that it's cold outside." But then...I actually became a dad. And I realized after so much explaining, at a certain point as the authority, you just have to say "Because I said so." I'm appealing to my kids to trust me. That's fine if you don't understand why I'm telling you to put a coat on, or to make your bed even though it's going to get messy again, or to use the bathroom before we leave the house even though you don't have to go - you just need to trust me on this one.

And at a certain point with our doubt, that's what it comes down to with God. Look, sometimes you're given the answers but ultimately, what it comes down to is God asking you, "Are you going to trust me or not? In your doubts and your questions are you going to trust that I know what I'm talking about? I've proved myself trustworthy over and over again. I sent my Son Jesus for your sin to conquer the grave, I sent my Spirit to dwell in you, and every promise I've ever made I've never once broken...and I've promised you I'm not going anywhere, and I am coming back for you once and for all - are you going to trust me or not?"

And a side note - if you're here this morning and you're struggling with intellectual doubt. Please be honest. Be open with your LifeGroup. Email one of the pastors - we'd love to pray for you and point you to helpful resources because we want Jesus for you more than anything.

2 - Advent gives hope for the disappointed.

Zechariah's refusal to believe arises out of past hurt. His present doubt stems from past disappointment.

Which can I just say, some of the time, not all the time, but some of the time, whenever I've talked to people wrestling with intellectual doubt - it stems from some previous hurt or disappointment. In other words, intellectual doubt isn't really the thing they have an issue with. It's the hurt they've felt perhaps from God, or from their church, or from how they hoped their life would be one thing but then something totally unexpected happened. It's not a mental issue, it's a heart issue.

Zechariah thinks the bitterness of his past overrides the promises and power of God. He's not the skeptic atheist, he's the church kid who grew up around God his whole life and life has knocked him too far down. The physical barrenness in their family has led to a spiritual barrenness and disappointment in his soul. And maybe that's you today:

- A spiritual barrenness that says, "God, you're not in control." I know what your word says, but how could you be in control and the situation be the way it is...?
- "God, I see you working over here in this person's life, but it sure seems like you've forgotten about me."

- “God, I keep praying for this to happen and I’ve seen nothing happen. And part of me feels like what’s the point of praying anymore? It doesn’t seem like you’re gonna do anything about it.”
- “God, I know you talk a big game about experiencing this peace and joy in my life, but I look back on my past and think there’s no way you can work in this.”
- “God, this has been a habit and problem for so long and there’s no way I can shake it. I know you’ll say we’ll be more than conquerors and that we can do all things through Christ... but I give up. I know God might have forgiven His people a long time ago but He can’t do that for me now”

Your issue may not be children like it was for Zechariah. Maybe something else has let you down and led you to this place of disappointment and barrenness.

- Your career never turned out like you’d hoped and so you’re in the office on auto-pilot because you think “God there’s no way you can be at work here.”
- You’ve never gotten the success you thought you deserved so you’re jaded and you’ve stopped trying in life
- You’re still single and always wanted to be married
- Or, you feel like your marriage has let you down.
- You’re sick and can’t enjoy health.
- Maybe you’ve been a Christian for a while...and you’ve seen too many people walk away from Jesus entirely, people whose lives you’ve opened up to and so it’s hard to open up and be vulnerable to others. Maybe you’ve been on mission for a while...and you’ve seen so many people you’ve prayed for show no spiritual interest and so you think “What’s the point?”

There are many ways to be spiritually barren. Where now your soul feels empty with no hope for the future.

The point is not that God will give you that thing you wanted. In fact, in many ways, Zechariah never got the enjoyment out of the thing he hoped for. He probably died when his son John was a boy... never got to see him grow up, see his grandkids; John the Baptist probably never took care of Zechariah in old age. John the Baptist himself dies when he is young.

The point is not that the birth of John the Baptist took away their soul’s barrenness; no, there was another baby who was in the process of being born to somebody else who would do that. And that baby’s name was Jesus. Jesus is the answer to our soul’s barrenness.

You see... **Our doubting and disappointments don't need answers or a better life, ultimately, we need Jesus himself.**

Jesus' primary mission was to restore us to God. And that's what takes away our barrenness. The Messiah to be born to Mary would take away our sin and condemnation by dying for it in our place and removing our separation from God. He would make it so we knew God again, and God is such a treasure that when you have Him, you can deal with the disappointment of childlessness or poor health or lack of success or whatever.

It's not that He doesn't also often give good gifts like children or success or marriage; just that the BEST gift He gives, the one that takes away sadness and despair and fills your life with true joy and real security, is not any of those things; the best gift is God Himself.

If you find yourself growing cold towards God because he hasn't done something in your life, then perhaps you fell in love with the wrong thing.

The real gift, the ultimate blessing, and answer to my spiritual barrenness was the gift of God Himself.

And so that is what we're trying to push for, in part, this Advent season. Jesus is the treasure. Jesus is the greatest gift. Jesus is the answer to all your doubts, and Jesus is the hope for all your disappointments. You could get everything you wanted out of life and you could have every question under the sun answered, but without Jesus, you are still in a living hell, separated from the God of creation. And it is only through Jesus that He made a way for you to experience the peace that your soul truly longs for - which nothing in this world can ever give you.