

“The Advent of Zechariah and Elizabeth”

St. Luke 1:2-25

Advent can be a long season for parents and children alike. Long for parents because their days are filled with preparations for Christmas – the calendar is jam packed – and there’s an abundance of stress. Long for children – because they long for Christmas break, and for Christmas presents. Even though the Advent calendars count down the days – the days seem like they will never end.

For Zechariah and Elizabeth, the Advent waiting was not just four weeks. St. Luke tells us that they are “righteous” and “walk blamelessly” – identifying them as Old Testament saints (like Simeon) – who eagerly await the consolation of Israel.

It’s a long wait from Genesis 3:16 and the promise that the Seed of the woman will crush the serpent’s head – to Luke 1, and the birth announcements of John the Baptist and Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah.

So, what do you do while waiting? Well, the Lord tells us to go about our business – that is, our vocations – that which the Lord has called us to do. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth come from the priestly line of Aaron – which means their lives were centered around the liturgy of the Temple – which points them in faith to the Christ, the promised Savior.

And that’s what Zechariah is doing. He’s a priest. He’s at work. He’s serving at the Temple “before God.” It’s his turn to offer up the incense on the altar of incense while the whole multitude of people were praying outside the Holy Place.

As the prayers ascend before God – so does the incense – for the prayers of God’s people are sweet-smelling and pleasing to the Lord.

But what about Zechariah and Elizabeth’s prayers? Like you, they no doubt offered up many prayers – and certainly they had prayed to the Lord for a child. Yet, their prayer remained unanswered. Elizabeth is barren, and they are both advanced in years. Does God hear their prayers?

What a struggle that must be for a priest – whose business it is to speak to God on behalf of the people – to not have his own prayers answered. Are they cursed? After all, the Lord “blessed” Adam and Eve and told them to “be fruitful and multiply” – and yet, Zechariah and Elizabeth have no child.

Does God hear their prayers? He’s not answering. Does He care? [P] Have Zechariah and Elizabeth given up all hope? Have their prayers – at least for a child – ceased? It’s been a long, agonizing wait.

Into their hopelessness – the Lord breaks in and interrupts their lives. The Lord’s messenger, who stands before the Father in heaven – now comes to stand before the priest who stands “before God” in the Temple.

Fear and trembling falls on Zechariah at the sight of the Angel Gabriel – but the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid ...”

Have you noticed that the Lord keeps on saying this? One might begin to wonder if it means what He thinks it means. As the Lord always does – He follows up His admonition to “not be afraid” with His reason why we need not fear. “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.”

What joy!!! Their prayers have been answered. “And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord.” Finally, this wonderful blessing from the Lord.

But wait ... literally ... wait. It’s been a long Advent already, but the waiting continues. Did you notice that the angel did not say WHEN Elizabeth will bear a son? It’s not like old and barren Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament who were told that – at this time next year the Lord would come to them, and Sarah would have a son.

So, the Advent season continues. The waiting resumes. And Zechariah and Elizabeth are not getting any younger.

Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” In other words, this all sounds great – but impossible. Give me some assurance. Give me some kind of proof.

And if I might paraphrase the Lord’s response, He says “Because I said so!” I have given you my Word. That’s all you need! But since you want a sign, I’ll give you a sign. “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.”

Normally the priest on duty would come out after the time of prayer and incense and bless the people with the Benediction given to Aaron – but ironically, Zechariah is not able to bless the people, until he receives the promised blessing of the Lord.

So, what about your Advent – your prayers – your waiting? Does God not answer you? Do you think you’re cursed? Sin certainly wreaks havoc on God’s good gifts – and you experience that in various ways in your life (and for some, that means being without a child) – but the Lord is victorious over sin, and He blesses you with many gifts.

Are you hopeless? Have you given up waiting for the Lord to answer your prayer? Have you stopped praying? Remember, what is impossible for man, is not impossible with God.

Or, are you like Zechariah and Elizabeth – to whom the promise is given – but still there is a time of waiting. The Annunciation of the Birth of John the Baptist reminds us that the Lord works in His time – and His promises are fulfilled in “their time.”

Like Zechariah, the Lord has given you His Word – and His signs. The Lord who has come in the flesh in Bethlehem – and who will come again on the Last Day – comes to you in His Word and Sacraments in these days. His Sacraments are signs – tangible forms of the Gospel – that assure you that all He has promised is true.

Your sin is washed away. You are reborn to a new life, a new creation. The Lord has redeemed you by His blood so that death passes over you. He nourishes you for the journey. He gives hope to sinners.

These blessings that the Lord gives to us, are like the blessing given to Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Though Zechariah is mute and cannot speak – though Elizabeth kept herself hidden for five months after she conceived – in her “six month,” her relative, a virgin named Mary, will come to her – telling her how the angel of the Lord has announced the impossible to her. She, a virgin, will give birth to a son – the very Son of God – the long awaited Savior.

Rejoice Mary, the angel says to her – for you will be the mother of the Messiah. And this becomes the “great joy” when the angel tells the shepherds of the Savior’s birth – but it all begins with the joy and gladness of Zechariah and Elizabeth, when their days of waiting are over.

And so it is with you. It’s hard to wait – but the Lord has given us something to hold onto – His promises for faith to grasp as “most certainly true.” Who knows how long our Advent will be – but we wait, rejoicing in the Savior who has been born “for you” – rejoicing in the One named Jesus, who saves His people from their sins. Amen.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.