

Luke 1:5-17

First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2009 Lincoln, NE
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In God's Time

⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.

⁶ Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.

⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,

⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.

¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,

¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.

¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God.

¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

David Bryant, a national prayer leader and author spoke a Friday evening session at a prayer conference in Bismarck several years ago. He directed his comments to the pastors in the audience. He explained that pastors have lost their energy and drive for ministry in part because they have become disappointed too many times. Standing next to the bed of a 35 year-old cancer patient, we pray expectantly that God will bring healing and a few months later we conduct the funeral. We pray for renewal in our churches and nothing seems to happen. We pray and sometimes it seems like only about half our prayers are answered.

The trouble is that we pray and expect it to be answered our way. Have you ever stayed in a luxury hotel or perhaps gone on a cruise. You pick up the phone and order room service and they bring your meal. You send a pair of pants out and they come back cleaned and pressed. That's the concept many people have concerning prayer. We have created God into a "Divine bellhop" to do our will. This is the fact: Prayer is about waiting on God, not God waiting on us. Yes, he brings us blessings. We are surrounded by his goodness and mercy, but we've forgotten that God is sovereign. We've forgotten about the supremacy of Christ. Bryant said, *"We half-heartedly preach about Christ and we talk about prayer and how God answers prayer, but we don't mean it. We tell people that God will be with them in their trouble, but we don't necessarily believe it ourselves. We have to start at the basic truth that Christ is supreme."*

The apostle Paul in his letters to the churches reminded them of the supremacy of Christ (Phil 2:9, Col 1:18) *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name. (Phil. 2:9) And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. (Col. 1:18)*

When we start with the basic of THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST, we realize that Christ is in control. When the 35 year-old dies, we are reminded that Christ is in control. When Christians pray for revival in the church, they can be reminded that Christ brings revival in his time (Chronos) not ours. So many times when we pray, we pray with so little expectation that God will actually answer our prayer. Even when God gives us the perfect answer, we don't recognize it for two reasons: 1.) It wasn't answered the way we wanted, and 2.) It was answered but we took it for granted.

For centuries the Jewish people awaited the coming of the Messiah. They had it all figured out, what he would look like and what he would do. Zechariah, who you saw portrayed this morning, was a man of the priestly line, one of 18,000 to 20,000 priests who awaited their turn to offer the daily prayers. It was literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. As he entered the place and began to recite his prayers, he saw a figure standing before him. It was the angel Gabriel who began to speak and told him that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a child, that they would not go to their graves childless. God did not answer the prayer the way Zechariah had expected. Having babies was for young people, Elizabeth and Zechariah were both old. However, we find that

God answers prayer in His own way and in his own time. The time was not yet right when they were young, but now the time was right.

In the Western world waiting is a curse to be eradicated because it accomplishes nothing and wastes time. Almost everything is made convenient: food preparation, service, transportation, communication and leisure. In contrast, in the developing world waiting in long lines for service in a government office is a way of life, often being seasoned with lively conversations with the people around you in the line. But most people in the developed world will do almost anything to avoid waiting. Waiting is boring and a waste of time. To keep people waiting is a social sin. Forcing customers to wait is disastrous for business.

So for us to wait upon the Lord and his timing is difficult for us – almost to the point of being impossible. We tend to almost turn against God if we have to wait for his hand to move. Let me give you an example. In Isaiah 8:17, we read these words. ***17 I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob. I will put my trust in him.*** After the testimony and warnings made by the prophets for many centuries, and even after living in captivity and then repenting – Israel’s heart once again turned cold toward God. So for over four centuries, it was completely silent from God. From the end of the Old Testament to the beginning for the Gospel accounts, there was silence from God. The temple worship continued. The sacrifices continued. The Greeks and Romans occupied their lands and Israel’s relationship with Jehovah was mere ritual and form with no real passion.

The dream and promise of the Messiah had also grown cold. Yet there were still some – a small remnant, who continued to wait upon the Lord. Zechariah was one of those who remained faithful to God. Yet even as faithful as he was, his deepest desire was to have a child. Now he and his wife were seeing their hope wane as they grew well beyond the age of having children. Years earlier, Zechariah probably stopped hoping for the prospect of having a child. He had become content with what God had for him. The pain of being childless may never have left him and Elizabeth, yet he had accepted God’s will.

More than that, he continued to wait upon the Lord even in his disappointment. Too often, we hear of people who lost their faith, lost their love and respect for God – because they experienced a tragic episode in their lives that left them with the thought – *“If God is loving and kind, how could*

he allow me to experience such a loss?" To experience loss and continue to love and serve Christ is the essence of faith. It is like the Psalmist who said,, "Even tho I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." We are saying, "God is present even in my disappointment and tragedy. He is walking with me, crying with me and suffering with me."

When I attended my friend Dan's funeral last month, the pastor who is Dan's cousin and also a good friend of mine, preached on God's presence during the tragedy. He said that when Dan was caught in that combine and was dying, God had not abandoned him. Jesus was with him when he was dying.

We read in scripture that Jesus bears our burdens and is with us always. He was with those Christian martyrs in the first century who died at the hands of the Roman Empire. He is also with us now when we suffer. So our disappointments may be caused in part, by our American Christianity which says, "We shouldn't have to wait for anything because everything should be convenient." AND "We shouldn't suffer because God only wants us to be comfortable and happy."

Rather, like Zechariah, we ought to wait upon the Lord for his good plan and his good timing. In the story in today's text of Zechariah waiting on God, he experienced a double joy: having his own son, and his son being specially anointed by God for service. He may have recalled the words of the prophet Isaiah several centuries earlier and were now contained in holy scripture, ³¹ **but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.**" Amen.