

Advent

MD | 

With Great Expectation

Written by Keli Miller

*"Don't be afraid your
prayer has
been heard."*

This was Zechariah's moment. To be chosen to offer incense was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Zechariah must have thought carefully about what he was going to pray for. Reciting his prayer list over and over, careful not to forget a single item.

This was not a time for personal prayer or reflection. He was praying for all of Israel. So when the angel appeared to him saying that his prayer had been heard, a baby was likely the last thing on his mind.

Zechariah's prayer for a child was probably a prayer that was long given up on. No longer did he believe God would do it. His time had passed, this prayer would not be an answered one.

"Do not be afraid; your prayer has been heard." -Luke 1:13

God remembers the prayers we have given up on.

Looking at his circumstances first and not who God is, Zechariah doubted the angel's words. I wonder what he doubted most: Was he doubting that God would do what he said he would? Or was he doubting that God was actually able to do it and further so actually wanted to? Or maybe more than anything else, Zechariah doubted that God wanted to do it through him?

Zechariah would carry his doubt in silence out of the temple and back to his home where he and his wife would conceive a child. Even in his silence and doubt, Zechariah partnered with God. Zechariah's doubt did not change God's plan. God still answered his prayer, even in the presence of doubt.

God holds true to his word, even when we wrestle with doubt. Doubts can often leave us feeling as imposters or frauds. But through Zechariah, God shows us that he is not challenged by our doubts. He is able to hold space for them, working through and around them.

He is Immanuel. The God with us, through doubt.

God, in the silence and
unbelief your words hold
true. When we lose faith,
your promises remain. Just
like a star guiding shepherds
through a dark night, we hold
on to your word. A guiding
light of faith when unbelief
pulls at us. You are the
Immanuel, the God with us
through it all.

Amen.

Read &
Reflect

- Text: Luke 1:5-23
- Holding on to hope is not for the weak. It takes resiliency and trust. It can hurt and at times feel foolish. Where has your hope felt foolish? Spend some time today dusting off the prayers that have gone silent in your heart.

- Text: Genesis 32:22-31
- Zechariah's wrestling and silence transformed his doubt into belief. We shouldn't be afraid to wrestle with God. I'm reminded of how Jacob wrestled with God and was marked by it. God is not weakened by your doubt. Sometimes the first step in faith is naming our disbelief. What would it look like for you to wrestle with God? Are there doubts that you've been keeping hidden?

- Text: Luke 1:59-80
- John was not a family name. This is significant in that it shows us that this child and the calling on his life would go well beyond his family's tradition. It's after he affirms his son's name that his silence is broken and he bursts forth in song. Michael Milton, a pastor and professor, calls Zechariah's song "the song of a mind made clear." In his song he recalls God's promises to Israel and speaks of a new covenant that is coming. Where are you needing clarity right now? As you wait, is your mind cloudy with disbelief? Spend some time in prayer asking for clarity and recalling God's promises.

Expanding in Faith

Week 2
Luke 1:39-45

"This is the Lord's doing. He has shown his favor to me by removing my disgrace among other people."

The season of Advent is one of anticipation. It is a season doused in hope, waiting for what is promised, and a reminder of what we still long for. It is in seasons of waiting that I often find myself exhausted by the optimism that comes with hope. It would be easier to forgo optimism. Let me be surprised when what's promised happens, not expectant.

In Elizabeth's story, I see this Advent theme of waiting most clearly. Through her, I am encouraged to not grow weary in my waiting but to let it deepen my faith and expectation. When we meet Elizabeth she is very old and childless. Both her and Zechariah are considered righteous and come from priestly families, yet still, they have been unable to conceive.

This is an Elizabeth who has longed for a child to call her own, who has watched friend after friend announce their own pregnancies. An Elizabeth who has attended baby showers (or whatever the biblical equivalent would have been) for women who are half her age. Elizabeth, who has watched as women far less righteous than her get the honor of having a baby.

It is this Elizabeth who is now expecting a child of her own.

This is a woman who understands waiting, and in her waiting her faith has not been diminished but has expanded. We see this when she first hears of her pregnancy and says,

"This is the Lord's doing. He has shown his favor to me by removing my disgrace among other people."

And again when she meets Mary and immediately, joyfully declares that Mary is the mother of her Lord. And finally when her child is born, with a silent husband at her side, defies tradition and family wishes insisting on following God's instructions in naming her child John.

As much as Advent is about waiting it is also a season of faith deepening. In Advent we remember Jesus' birth and that God does not forget his people. We remember that it was on a single silent night, when hope was but a faint flicker, a child was born, whose very presence would keep faith alive, and carry our burdens.

"A thrill of hope, a weary world rejoices."

God, on the darkest of days
you are our shining light of
hope. We remember that
night when a weary world
rejoiced at the sight of a
baby, and join them in praise
and anticipation.

You safely hold and guard all
of our hopes. It is in faith that
we wait for you. You are
Immanuel, God with us
through the waiting.

Amen.

Read & Reflect

- Text: Luke 1:23-45
- I love Elizabeth and Mary's relationship and support of one another, each encouraging the other in their unique calling, with no signs of comparison or jealousy. Is this something that you have experienced? If so, what was it like? How might you foster this kind of friendship in your life? What do you think this story of friendship says about God's character and desire for us?

- Text: Romans 8:22-25
- Henri Nouwen, Dutch Catholic Priest and author wrote, "Active waiting is being open to the promise yet to be fulfilled. Patient waiting is staying fully in the present moment. Expectant waiting is trusting that this long process will bear fruit."

- Our waiting is intimately tied to our faith. How have you seen waiting impact your own faith life?
- Text: John 1:1-5, Isaiah 9:1-7
- It is a courageous act to hold on to hope. What is it that you are waiting for? How is Christ's incarnation, the image of God made flesh, an encouragement to you in your waiting?

*"Rejoice, favored one!
The Lord is with you!"*

Traditionally when celebrating Advent the candle for joy is a different color than all the other Advent candles. A tangible cue for an internal shift from preparing and longing for Christ to receiving Christ himself. Joy doesn't require certainty or the absence of fear and pain, it will come right into the mess of it all. But joy does require trust. Joy is a harbinger of God's presence. A defiant, noticeable, overflowing gift. Where trust is sown, joy grows.

Joy was in the Angel's message to Mary.

“ Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!”

Joy was with Cousin John doing flips in the womb.

“ As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy.”

Joy was with Mary bursting forth with God song.

"With all my heart I glorify the Lord. In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior."

Before all of this, though, was trust. Trust in God's angels and their message, trust in the scriptures when they foretold of a messiah, and trust in God's character. Mary, a young woman, engaged but unmarried is now pregnant. Her reputation and livelihood are on the line and yet we see her boldly sing praises of God's goodness rejoicing.

It is daring to choose joy amidst uncertainty, to let ourselves fully celebrate and not hold back, fearful of what might await on the other side of this high.

But this is what we can trust, that Christ has come and redeemed all that was broken, and is still redeeming all things today. The advent of Christ is new everyday. We can celebrate with joy, because our trust is in Christ.

So, let your joy be heard. Let it be a defiant sound heard throughout the world.

Rejoice, rejoice, Immanuel has come.
God is with us.

God, your joy is not temporary
nor fickle. We come out of
agreement with fear that tells us
that joy is dangerous and can't be
trusted. Even in the midst of
uncertainty, loss, and
disappointment, your joy is long-
suffering. It stands with us through
all seasons. We
remember when Christ came to
earth, and celebrate that good
news with great joy. You are
Immanuel, God with us through it all.
Our trust is in you and our joy is
deep.
Amen.

Read &
Reflect

- Text: Matthew 2:1-23, Jeremiah 31:13-17
- Matthew's narrative of Jesus' birth is soaked in references to Israel's exodus from Egypt, subtly showing the reader that Jesus can be seen as a savior who will fulfill God's promises. What does the fulfillment of God's promise to "turn our mourning into dancing" mean for you today?

- Text: Luke 1:46-56
- Mary's joyful song is a radical display of trust. How does your trust in God feel radical in this season? How might God be inviting you to stretch your trust this Advent?

- Text: Matthew 11:8-25

- As a supporting character, I often overlook Joseph's role in the nativity story. Yet Joseph took a radical leap of faith staying with Mary. Joseph was described as a righteous man. His initial plan to divorce Mary would have been in line with the law of the Torah, but Joseph risked his reputation and chose to believe the Angel's message. Joseph's trust in God made way for a deeper joy. I'm reminded of Paul's instruction to hold fast in times of trials and to "rejoice always." How can you experience God's joy today, right in the middle of your mess?

"Glory to God in the highest
heaven, and on earth peace
among those whom he
favors!"

I've never liked the darkness, unable to see what's hidden before me, shadows looming like monsters. I wonder how the shepherds felt on that starry night. Sitting in darkness, night after night, keeping watch for monsters that might threaten their flock. It's here that the angel greets them and announces that peace is now on earth. Their first response is relatably one of terror.

"Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified."

- Luke 2:9

One angel then turns into a choir singing,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

- Luke 2:14

And just like that they are gone, and the shepherds return to their darkness, perhaps lit only by firelight. I wonder how their conversation went. If there was any lingering fear or momentary disbelief, scripture doesn't tell us, all we see is their final decision to "move with haste," emboldened by the presence of God. Let's not miss the irony of the Prince of Peace being announced in a moment of pure terror.

And let us not also miss one of the very first moments of Jesus' radical ministry in choosing lowly shepherds as the first to receive the news of his arrival.

The worries and concerns of the world are passing away as the shepherds, under the shadow of night, abandon their post in search of the Christ child.

This is the radical nature of God's peace, it meets us in the dead of night. It comes before we have all the answers. It comes after we jump yet before our feet hit the ground. It meets us in the in-between of the fall.

It is Peace that breaks through our night in joyful song.

God, You have come, hallelujah!
You have met us where we are,
in the darkness of night. When
fear and worry darken our skies,
be the light that breaks through.

When conflict arises and
disorder reigns, remind us of
your name. You are the Prince
of Peace. You are Immanuel,
the God with us amidst the mess.

Amen.

Read &
Reflect

- Text: Luke 2:8-20
- It is easy to think of “peace on earth” as the absence of conflict or fear. New Testament scholar R.T. France redefines this definition. He says, Biblical peace on earth is more than the absence of conflict- it is reconciliation and restoration established by Jesus... Conflict isn't necessarily the enemy of peace, but indifference might be. Peace is found in connection to a God who is interested and invested in our messy and chaotic life. It is found in a God who draws near to us and covers us in grace.
- How does this redefinition of peace change your outlook or expectations? What does it mean to you to learn that God is interested and invested in your everyday life?

- Text: Isaiah 11 : 1-9
- The New Testament word for peace (eirēnē) hints more towards an understanding of harmony. When I think of harmony, I think of this Isaiah passage of leopards and goats lying peacefully together. The whole passage sounds idyllic and Eden-like. This harmony of all creation is the kind of peace that Jesus brings us. In the New Testament era leopards and goats lying together might be similar to Jews and Gentiles working together, united by Christ. A similar metaphor for us today might be liberals and conservatives, all adopted into the family of God. This advent season, as we remember the arrival of the Prince of Peace, how can we be bringers of peace in our communities and cities?

- Text: John 20:19-23
- I am a really anxious person, a reality that I have been coming to terms with for years now. I've struggled to find God's peace when so much of life is uncertain and pain feels unavoidable. In those moments, I feel like my fear is proof that I don't have enough faith and that I'm the problem. If you relate at all, know that you are not alone and that your anxiety does not make you a bad Christian. I find passages like this one especially encouraging, to know that as the disciples grieve and tremble with fear behind locked doors, Jesus comes to meet them. They needed to see the wounds of his flesh to be comforted. When I find myself spiraling into the abyss of fear and anxiety I need something to hold on to. I need evidence of a God who is with me and understands.
- What have been verses or reminders of truth that you turn to in moments of fear and anxiety?

Hopeful Pursuit

Week 5
Luke 2:22-38

"Master, now you are
dismissing your servant in
peace"

Imagine holding an 8-day-old baby Jesus. The smell and squishy feel of new life resting in your arms is an immediate source of endorphins. While I highly doubt newborn baby Jesus smelled like Johnson and Johnson, I'm sure his little fingers and toes still had a similar effect.

Now, imagine holding newborn baby Jesus and recognizing him as the messiah you've been waiting for. Imagine leaving your house because you have a feeling that the long-awaited Savior is at the temple, and being right! I am blown away by Simeon's response in the Gospel of Luke, recognizing Jesus at first glance. Listen to what he says,

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which

you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

Both Simeon’s and Anna’s lives are incredible examples of faithfulness. I read their stories and I am deeply moved by their dedication and confidence in God’s word. I want to be like them in my waiting, faithful and focused. I want to be like them in my testimony, uninhibited, bold, and quick to declare God’s work.

Our situation today is not that much different than theirs... Okay maybe with modern technology and societal norms it is immensely different. What I mean, rather, is that like Anna and Simeon we are living in the tension of waiting. We have scripture to tell us about God’s promises of his kingdom

to come and yet thousands of years have passed and we still live every day in the tension of “ here and not yet.” Meaning, we have the Holy Spirit and can experience heaven on earth, but also are plagued with troubles and pain.

Anna and Simeon’s lives were spent in prayer and pursuit of heavenly things. May we be resilient in our waiting like Simeon and Anna, keeping our eyes ever fixed on the things of Heaven.

God, you are faithful to all your promises. The author of all redemption, you have been making things new from the beginning of time.

Your very presence ignites us with joy, emboldening us with faith. Even today as we celebrate your first coming, we wait eagerly for your second with longing. May we not grow weary or jaded in our old age but always be quick to recognize your face in another and sing of your testimony and faithfulness to us. You are Immanuel, God with us through it all.

Amen.

Read &
Reflect

- Text: Luke 2: 22-35
- Simeon's words in Luke are often referred to as, "Simeon's Song," or "Nunc Dimittis" in Latin which means, "let thou depart." Simeon had held baby Jesus closely in his own arms and was ready to rest peacefully now that He had seen salvation. How can the truth of Christ's incarnation bring us rest?
- Text: Luke 2: 36-38
- In her fasting and praying, Anna was feasting on the promises of God. Verse 38 reads that she immediately sang praise and shared about Christ to those who were awaiting redemption. Because Anna remembered the promises God had spoken, she was able to recognize and sing of his faithfulness at the sight of Jesus. Spend the next few moments remembering God's faithfulness. Reflect on times when God has blessed, rescued, or provided for you. Remember his promises and thank him for his faithfulness. How can you share those stories with others?

- Text: Colossians 3 :1-3, Luke 2 :22-28
- Anna and Simeon lived a life hidden in God, spending their days anticipating the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. Reflecting on Anna and Simeon's stories, is there an invitation for you? What would it mean for you to set your mind on things above?

*“In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.*

*And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.*

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Isaiah 40:3-5

