

Call to Worship Isaiah 30:18; 64:4 Psalm 33:20; 38:15 John 14:27

Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield.

Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!

Lord, I wait for you; you will answer, Lord my God.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Prayer of Invocation

Come to us, Lord Jesus, and bring us the gift of new insight. Let us leave this place today challenged by your call to change. Complacency is our companion as we examine ourselves. It is too easy to take you for granted, dear God, and to quietly accept the clutter of our lives. Capture our attention, O God! In Jesus' name, Amen.

The Word

Luke 1:5-25

Common English Bible

During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old.

One day Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. Following the customs of priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense. All the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering.

An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John.

He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord's eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. ¹⁶ He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they wondered why he was in the sanctuary for such a long time. When he came out, he was unable to speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he gestured to them and couldn't speak.

When he completed the days of his priestly service, he returned home. Afterward, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant. She kept to herself for five months, saying, "This is the Lord's doing. He has shown his favor to me by removing my disgrace among other people."

Living the Word

Today is my grandson, Oliver's third birthday! I have many grand hopes and dreams for his life, but up to now he has been a pretty normal 2-year-old.

During the month of October, our good friend, Howard Stone had a serious 4-wheeler accident, in which he fractured his shoulder blade.

It is a rare kind of break, very painful and can only be healed by time. He is off work for three to five months.

Oliver calls him 'Uncle Howie; they are very close friends, especially because Uncle Howie lets Oliver play with his smart phone, watching videos of tractors.. Howie has helped the family out with care for Oliver since he was born. Oliver quickly caught on that he now could not climb on 'Uncle Howie' as 'Howie has an owie' and needs Oliver's help and care. So Oliver has been running errands for Uncle Howie.

Last week when Oliver came over for supper, he informed us - numerous times, that he was now 'Uncle Howie's little angel.' Again, I have high hopes for my grandson; an angel wasn't on the list, yet who is to know if he might be, in some way, a messenger from God?

In the Bible, the Angel Gabriel, whose name means "God is my strength, is mentioned in both the Old and New Testament. Gabriel is an angel who typically serves as a messenger sent from God to certain people. In the Old Testament, he appeared to the prophet Daniel, delivering explanations of Daniel's visions (Daniel 8:15-26, 9:21-27).

In the Gospel of Luke, Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, and to the virgin Mary foretelling the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. (Luke 1:11-38). In the Book of Daniel, he is referred to as "the man Gabriel", while in the Book of Luke, Gabriel is referred to as "an angel of the Lord".

In the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches, the archangels Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel are considered saints.

In Islam, the Archangel Gabriel also dictated the spiritual text, The Koran, to Mohammed. As a result, Gabriel became known as the "Messenger" angel. There is a spiritual belief that Gabriel's role continues in the world, helping both parents and human messengers.

Gabriel has long been known as a powerful and strong archangel, and those who call upon this angel may find themselves pushed into action that leads to beneficial results. Gabriel definitely was, and may still be, an archangel of action!

So today we shared the story of the life changing event in Zechariah and Elizabeth's lives, which we read together in this morning's scriptures.

They wanted children, but Elizabeth hadn't been able to conceive and was teased and bullied by the other women of the community for her barren-ness. They had waited, prayed and hoped for many years for a child, but it hadn't happened...

According to the book of Chronicles, Twenty-four priestly divisions served in the temple at Jerusalem in a rotation system. Zechariah was one of the priests on a rotation with many other groups of Priests who would travel from their homes to Jerusalem for a week of service in the temple.

This day, Zechariah is "chosen by lot" to go inside the temple and burn incense on the Altar of Incense in the Holy Place. It is considered a great honor.

Since there were a large number of priests, no priest was allowed to serve as the officiating priest more than once in his lifetime. Sometimes the high priest himself officiated.

As the officiating priest, it was Zechariah's job to place incense on the heated altar and then pray. It was at that point that an angel of the Lord did indeed enter the Holy Place. What an incredible vision to Zechariah and what an amazing promise: "*Elizabeth will give birth to your son. You must name him John. He will be great in the Lord's eyes.*"

If you or I had an experience like Zechariah, our brains would be questioning if it was really happening. I wonder how we would respond? What amazing words, what amazing promises about a son who is not yet born! But, instead of rising to faith, Zechariah sinks to doubt.

In defense of Zechariah, denial is one of the first responses-to-trauma in our lives. Even so, he has been chosen for a once-in-a-lifetime priestly job in the Holy of Holies, yet his expectations for this day, hadn't included a personal gift from God... Instead of rising to faith, Zechariah sinks to doubt.

The week is over, and Zechariah returns from his awesome experience in the Holy Place to the small highland village he calls home. Sure enough, Elizabeth becomes pregnant. But Zechariah can't speak to her about it. For now, *she* does the speaking.

"The Lord has done this for me," she says, with joy written in her face. No more does she feel disgraced and shamed among the women of the village because of her inability to bear a child. Now she is wonderfully pregnant and attributes it to God's favor. Zechariah who is shamed, and Elizabeth is honored.

Those of you who believe that things happen by luck, should consider the timing of this event. When I was young my mother used to help decide who would wash and who would dry the dishes by having us draw from two matches, one of which she had shortened. It was a way of drawing lots.

This is what the priests did on a much bigger scale. I thought if I was lucky I would get the match designated for drying.

My understanding of life now is that nothing is left to luck. God blesses us in the midst of any of our decisions, yet if we follow a clear path toward God's will, a plan develops to our benefit. If we think we are having bad luck, it may mean we are not paying attention or that we can't see the bigger picture.

There was no luck involved in Zechariah being chosen by lot that day. The whole birth of John and Jesus had to be a well planned out project from beginning to the end. God had a plan and timing different than Zechariah and Elizabeth. God's plan included having them wait to be the parents of John the Baptist until the right time.

For a year and a half during WWII, Lutheran theologian and anti-Nazi martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned at Tegel military prison awaiting trial. He wrote in his *Letters and Papers From Prison*: "A prison cell like this is a good analogy for Advent: one waits, hopes, does this or that—ultimately [unimportant] things—the door is locked and can only be opened from the outside."

Bonhoeffer continued his work in religious outreach among his fellow prisoners and guards, until his death. Sympathetic guards helped smuggle his letters out of prison, so we have them now.

The Hebrew people had within them the hope of a Savior and the wait for the Messiah. It had been foretold centuries before it happened.

Isaiah 9:6, "A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace."

Through centuries of many miserable times including exiles from their home country, hard labors, sacrifices for their faith in the One God, and oppression by their own church leaders, they held on to the hope that one day a Messiah would come to save them. As people we live hope-fully when all seems hope-less and we continue to pray with hope.

What a contrast with Mary, who when the birth of Jesus is announced, doesn't respond with "How *can* this happen?" like Zechariah, but "How *will* this happen?" and, "I am the handmaiden of the Lord. May it be to me as you have said" (1:34, 38).

I find it amazing, but true to life, that upright, moral, church-going people -- even pastors -- can be so filled with unbelief, so immersed in a secular world-view, that they are unable bring themselves to believe that God can work a contemporary miracle. Some even construct elaborate theologies to explain why God can't, won't, or shouldn't perform a miracle today!

Elizabeth never gave up hope of having a child. Her hope was fulfilled, though I imagine she had no idea the importance of this child and the difference he would make preparing the way for the Messiah. We all have hope for the children of our lives.

We hope they grow up healthy and good. We try to teach them what it means to be a Christian and live our lives for others. We hope that they listen! Yet we can never know what kinds of turns in their life will bring them closer to God or far away from God. For the children all we can do is mentor them and then pray for them.

For ourselves all we can do is live the Christian life to the best of our abilities and hope for each day that we are following Christ as God would have it. Our hope for the future always lies in the waiting we have for the return of Jesus Christ. Just as the Hebrew people of 2000 years ago, we also await the Messiah. Advent is the time of waiting with hope for a Savior. It is the anticipation before we celebrate the remembrance of Christmas and the coming of Christ, but it is also the hope for a better world through the gift of Christ, shared through our everyday lives as we give ourselves to others.

Listen closely as you prepare for Christmas, there are still messengers from God, inviting you to a new place in your Christian journey. You never know when you might be entertaining angels in your life...Be bold as Zechariah and Elizabeth were, in your hope for this world and for a world beyond this someday.

When we look back on the story of Bonhoeffer as well as Zechariah's, we can God at work in what was accomplished by their lives. Both men lived under oppression by a government that took control of their lives.

Both men prayed for peace. Neither man lived to see the great changes that would come soon after their deaths, but their lives helped forward the changes toward peace.

As we look forward for ourselves, our hope should be that we can accomplish what God has created us for. We may not even know what it is in our lifetimes, but each of us has something to fulfill as a Child of God. Lord, let it advance peace for our world...

As we come to a time of prayer today, let it be a time of remembrance of all that God has accomplished for us through Jesus Christ, and all that we have to hope for in the giving of ourselves for others.