

Sunday December 5, 2021
 Lesson 1: A Long Wait
 Scripture: Luke 1: 5-25, 57-58

Context:

The new winter Adult Bible Studies Curriculum begins in Advent and continues through the season of Epiphany. The focus of the unit is on how we can engage in practices and means to connect to God. As we participate in the communities we live in, we discover God is already at work and invites us to continue to lend our gifts and graces to the good work God does.

The first unit looks at waiting and how patiently waiting can lead us to places we could never go on our own. God has a way of giving us surprises as we wait as found in the season of Advent. The first lesson invites us to focus on how we understand the importance of waiting on God's timing.

The lesson comes from the gospel of Luke, one of the most detailed accounts of the birth of Christ. Yet before we can begin with the birth of Jesus, this narrative focuses on the relative of Jesus who will play a part in his story. We are introduced to Elizabeth and Zechariah, an older couple who have served the Lord all their lives as Zechariah is a priest and Elizabeth is a legacy from the tribe of Aaron, the priestly tribe. Later we will learn how Elizabeth is related to Mary, who will be the mother of Jesus.

This couple is the paragon of Jewish piety. The one thing which is unusual for them is their childlessness. Yet even still, Elizabeth, barren in old age, belongs to a rich tradition: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, the unnamed wife of Manoah, and Hannah.¹ Yet the couple is still revered and honored as the text describes their background and portrays them as a faithful couple.

Things unexpectedly change for the couple when while tending in the temple in Jerusalem, Zechariah is chosen to burn incense. As he does so, he is visited by the angel Gabriel. Gabriel proclaims how Elizabeth will have a child to be named John who will be raised as a Nazirite and will later be a renown prophet to prepare Israel for the coming Messiah.² Zechariah has doubts, and for such, he is silenced. He cannot even tell others the news of what has occurred.

He goes home and when Elizabeth conceives, she points to it as a gift from God. She specifically names this as a gift for several reason especially as it challenges the belief barrenness was a reproach from God.³ This is a gift to them. When the child is born, there is rejoicing, and people are able to put the story together. Zechariah can speak again and now the beginning of the preparation for the Messiah will begin as John is born. There is an air of expectation as John's birth signifies how the waiting for a Messiah is coming to an end.

¹ Craddock, Fred B. "Luke," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 25.

² Ibid., 26.

³ Ibid.

Application

Advent comes and we repeat the same word we do each year when it comes to this time. The word is “wait” and we state it up front at the beginning to remind us of what we truly need in this season. It is what we find in the Advent candles as over and over again, we welcome Christ in our lives and ask for his hope, peace, joy, and love to come into our lives. Sometimes it is immediately and other times, we find we must wait. And so we do the same for Christmas morning, preparing and being patient for this sacred day.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is a story of waiting and yet also one of submitting. Before we go any further, we must approach how infertility and barrenness are addressed in this text and in life today. Just as there were stigmas then, there are stigmas now. Infertility and barrenness are not reproaches from God. The piety of Elizabeth and Zechariah were not factors in their receiving a child. And there are some couples who may always struggle with infertility and this text is not one to read or recommend to them as a way to help them “wait” for a child. While reading this text, we might think of waiting in other ways and look to other tenets of the story to see how God is at work in the lives of these individuals.

For today we see how waiting and timing go together. When it comes to God, we often find God rarely works on our timetables. Sometimes this is the case when it comes to prayer, events, and expectations. Think of how all the gospel passages and New Testament books warn Christians of trying to figure out the end times, and what do Christians do? We read texts and then say the end is near by trying to comb Revelation and other books with random scriptures to fit a narrative.

If anything, God likes to keep us on our toes when it comes to waiting. There are times I will notice how my prayer requests shift. For instance, when I first started full time ministry and moved back to my home state, my personal prayer requests were repetitive for two things: good friends in my location and a strong mentor. I waited the first and part of the second year and kept wondering when those things would pop up and be the picture perfect image I imagined them.

I then realized several things. One, the answers were right there in front of me. I needed to count my blessings and see the people right there in front of me. They were there and I might have to travel or use other means to connect to them but they were there. Secondly, God gave me the ability to do things. I didn’t need to have a mentor approach me as I needed to seek one out and figure out what I need.

Yet in reflection, I am grateful for the period of waiting as I prayed for those things. I discovered more about myself, my values, and about God. The waiting helped me to think through things and to process the world around me.

Some prayers I know are never answered, and others will say God answers prayers. Regardless of where we might stand in the meantime on how all of it works, I will say I have found waiting to be just as good a companion as can be. Waiting helps us to see a little more clearly what is important to us and in our walk with God, we discover how our God rarely functions in ways we would expect.

Just ask Zechariah and Elizabeth. They had continued to be faithful, perhaps finding other ways to see how God answered their prayers. They were a respectful couple, revered by the faith community, and probably had their routines. And then lo and behold, an angel shows up and tells them the baby they had waited for early in life was

on its way. Nothing would be the same and they would now have a new set of prayers to lift up as aging parents with an infant and child to raise. Yet just as they did with their life in younger years, Zechariah and Elizabeth waited. They waited to see what God would do and acted as servants willing to be a part of whatever would be. They understood the importance of “waiting.”

How does waiting sit with you as a spiritual discipline? What was a time you prayed for something and God ended up surprising you? How has waiting helped you to become a better disciple of our Lord? What are you “waiting” on during this Advent? Who are the Elizabeths’ and Zechariahs’ in your life?

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