

Anticipation – Advent: Zechariah and Elizabeth
God of the Impossible does the Incredible

I came across this short story about Christmas that I quite liked and might be able to relate to one day, having four boys who love Christmas and presents!

Another young boy, probably about the age of my oldest son Noah, was so eager for a Transformers action figure one particular Christmas. His parents had a rule that he and his brother couldn't get out of bed until 5 a.m. to wake them up and open their gifts. That's early right? In our house it's supposed to be 7, but often ends up being a bit earlier!

Well, the young boy went to sleep on Christmas Eve and was so excited about the next day. Sure enough he woke up in the early hours of the morning and he waited in bed like a good boy, but eventually he couldn't stand it anymore, so at 4am he snuck down to the tree to have a peek. He looked at the tree, all lit up and surrounded by presents. Some were obviously socks and underwear – how many people are given those at Christmas time? - But one looked extremely promising and had his name written on it.

Against his better judgment, he peeled back a little bit of the wrapping paper and saw he had received the Transformers figure just as he had hoped.

Thrilled, he put the wrapping paper back together and snuck upstairs to his bed – trying to sleep again but really waiting with such anticipation to open that Transformers figure. Then, about an hour later – well, actually, exactly an hour! - He woke up his parents and older brother and headed downstairs. Much to all of their surprise, the presents had disappeared and they found a note from Santa that explained that, because he had peeked at his toy, Santa had taken back all the presents.

The little boy cried. He was heartbroken.

Just then his brother started laughing! He had seen his little brother take a peek at his present and decided to play the ultimate prank on him – and take all the presents away.

What are brothers for, right!

The unfortunate end to that story is the older brother has not been seen since.

We are in the season of advent at the moment.

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A time of waiting, expecting, and anticipation. What are we waiting for, expecting, and anticipating? Well for those with kids it might be their faces on Christmas day, for others it could be seeing the new Star Wars movie, or it might be time with family and friends, or perhaps just a decent break and holiday from work!

And probably, possibly, somewhere in the midst of all the Christmas shopping, work functions, family squabbles, decorations, Star Wars, and just general busyness and tiredness
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– we might be awaiting the celebration of Jesus Christ – both his birth and return one day.

Unlike Christmas presents under the tree before 5am, it's more than okay to take a sneak peek at Christ and who He is and what that means for us, because He is a gift that will never be taken away.

A few weeks ago we took a sneak peek at the Christmas story by looking at two elderly people who were part of it – Simeon and Anna. Simeon's greatest desire was to see the Messiah born and then he could die in peace. That was what he was anticipating, waiting for ... and he was fortunate enough to see the Christ child.

This morning we're going to sneak a peek at another elderly couple who are in a season of anticipation and feature prominently in the Christmas story – even though they didn't really know at the time. If you have your Bible go to Luke chapter 1 verse 5. As we read through the story and take detours along the way, the big idea I want you to take away today and for this Christmas season wherever you are at is this:

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God of the Impossible does the Incredible.

Let's read about it:

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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. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Let's have a closer look at Zechariah and Elizabeth. The first thing to note about them is they were righteous people.

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They lived good lives in the sight of God and obeyed His law and commandments. They submitted to His will for their lives. They lived to honour God alone rather than put on a good show before others. These two were different from most of their contemporaries in that they didn't really care about the status that went with being a priest. They lived in some obscure village south of Jerusalem rather than, as some other priests, in the elite section of the city itself, or in Jericho, the luxurious city of the palms.

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Second thing to note is they lived simple lives. They cared more about what God thought of them than what people thought. But let's not put them up in a pedestal and say they were perfect. They were still very much human like the rest of us, as we see in the story.

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Third thing to note is they didn't have life handed to them on a silver spoon either. For a couple, one of the most rewarding and satisfying things is having children. As a father of four, I know that children bring their parents such joy and delight – as well as tears and tantrums, but that's another story for another day! Well, Zechariah and Elizabeth had no children. In fact, Elizabeth was barren.

It's difficult for us to imagine the harsh stigma attached to this. Some Jewish Rabbis suggested it was a form divine punishment or it was the result of them living with secret sin. Whatever the case, it was perceived very negatively in their culture.

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Final thing to note is they were very old, at least sixty. (Is that old?) They were beyond the time of childbearing. So it was a hopeless situation they found themselves in. Now, Zechariah could have exonerated himself by divorcing Elizabeth. In their society, barrenness was a commonly accepted reason for divorce.

He could have gotten rid of her, married a younger woman, and had children by his new wife. That was what many other men in his circumstances would have done. But not Zechariah. Instead of fleeing the situation, he dropped to his knees and prayed. He committed the situation to the one person who could do something about it.

God of the impossible does the incredible.

After Zechariah had committed his problem to God, he simply got on with the job God had given him to do.

Let's keep reading, verse 8:

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Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

The priests had been divided into twenty-four courses by King David, and the order of Abijah, to which Zechariah belonged, was the eighth in line.

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Each course would be called to minister in the Temple on only two occasions during the entire year, each occasion lasting for a week. With nearly a thousand priests in each course, it becomes evident that entering the Holy Place and lighting the incense upon the golden altar was quite possibly a once-in-a-lifetime event. Similar to a Disneyland experience for any kid, if you like.

Well, it was Zechariah's turn. First he would choose two special friends to assist him.

One would remove the ashes from the previous evening's sacrifice. Then the second would place new burning coals on the altar. Finally, Zechariah would enter the Holy Place alone, bearing the golden censer, and at the given signal he would spread the incense over the coals. As the incense burned and a cloud of fragrance arose from the altar, the prayer of the worshipers outside would rise into the presence of God. It would have been quite something to behold.

When the ritual was finished it was time for Zechariah to leave the Holy Place. Let's read from verse 11:

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Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

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 call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

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He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

God of the impossible does the incredible. And that is exactly what he promised to do for Zechariah and Elizabeth.

But seemingly all this was too much for Zechariah to grasp. He had been praying for a son all these years and now he has this Word from God Himself through an angel of the Lord — surely it was too good to be true. I mean look at how old both he and Elizabeth were. This was impossible. They had accepted they weren't going to have any children.

Zechariah was completely human, looking at his situation from a completely human point of view. As you would expect.

I know of couples who have struggled with infertility and miscarriage, and the emotional roller coaster you go through when you or others talk about having children.

I imagine this is how Zechariah was feeling - overwhelmed and doubtful. If this wasn't a sign enough that the God of the impossible would do the incredible, the next sign surely was.

Because God did give Zechariah a sign. Possibly not the sign he thought he needed, but a sign nonetheless. It was this, from verse 19::

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The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.

And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

It was not very pleasant for him to lose his voice, and his hearing, as we see later in the story. But let me suggest that his inability to speak and hear were God's confirmation of His Word and Promise.

When Zechariah emerged from that Holy Place I also suggest he was a different man. He had always been a godly man, but his encounter with the angel Gabriel left him with a new awareness of God's greatness, a new sense of his own unworthiness, and now a strong, unwavering faith. Maybe not straight away. But it was definitely there. He rushed home to his wife – but he could only gesture to her what took place that day. Wives – having your husband not be able to speak for nine months: is that a good thing or a bad thing?

Let's continue reading, verse 23:

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When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people."

Well sure enough, The God of the impossible does the incredible and Elizabeth becomes pregnant.

This sets the scene for Mary, the mother of Jesus, to enter the picture. And the angel Gabriel appears to her as well and tells her about the son she will have, Jesus the promised Messiah. He also tells her about her relative Elizabeth, who by this stage is six months pregnant; exclaiming that there is nothing God cannot do. So Mary goes to visit Elizabeth.

If we stop and think about it, this is another sign of God's love and care that he placed these women within the same family. He could have made them strangers to one another, but, by making them relatives, He gave them mutual comfort and encouragement with one another. Like most women, they would have likely had lots of fun swapping pregnancy stories, sharing their hopes and dreams for their sons, and enjoying God's miracle for each of them. It was a truly intergenerational blessing for the older, Elizabeth, and the younger, Mary.

And then the moment they're all waiting for - the birth! First, the child of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Verse 57:

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When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

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Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. All the neighbours were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

His name is John.

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This is the declaration from Zechariah. It's faith in action. Remember that when Zechariah first heard from the angel Gabriel that he would have a son and to name to him John, he questions and doesn't believe. Now this has come full circle and he has seen the promise of God fulfilled and he has a son to call his own. A son that he declares is John. Not after himself or his family line, but after God's family line.

John means "The Lord is gracious." God has been so gracious to this family. They merely asked for a son to carry on the family name and priesthood. God gave them so much more: the forerunner of the Messiah, a child upon whom the hand of God was evident from his earliest days, a man whom Jesus Christ would call the greatest among men. A man that we have come to know as John the Baptist.

God of the impossible does the incredible.

And the time of silence is up. Zechariah can speak again! He praises God for His promises and salvation. Then he prophesies about his own son, John – verse 76:

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"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

We've taken a brief sneak peek this morning at Zechariah and Elizabeth's life together and I encourage you to read the full story for yourself. Through their lives and their faith we see that if a barren elderly couple can have a son and not just any son – a forerunner for the Messiah - there is nothing too hard for the Lord. In your life or in mine.

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God of the impossible does the incredible.

Christmas can be a hard time of the year for many people. Maybe this Christmas season you might be thinking the Lord has forgotten you in your hopeless situation. He hasn't. God of the impossible does incredible things for people every day, and you may be next. Believe him. Keep on faithfully living for Him and patiently waiting for Him to work, just as Zechariah and Elizabeth did. It wasn't their original plan to have a child in their sixties.

It was God's plan. And His plan may look very different from what we think we want.

As the worship team comes forward to lead us in a final song ...

Zechariah and Elizabeth may have thought they just wanted a son; but God gave them so much more than that. He gave them a prophet whose name is forever linked with the story of Jesus Christ. A preacher who prepared the world for the ministry of Jesus. And while their names are not mentioned again after the birth of their son John, they have left us a legacy of faith in the promises of the God.

God of the impossible has done the incredible. He came to this world as a little baby – the one who we waited and hoped for - and He will come again as a King – the one who we are waiting and hoping for. Trust in Him and His promises. Wait for His timing. And believe that our God of the impossible truly does the incredible.