

Elizabeth's Surprise
Christmas Surprise Week 3
December 11, 2016

Welcome/intro/vision

This is week 2 of a series we're calling Christmas Surprise, just 14 days until Christmas, how many of you are ready?

Well you're in good company--nobody was ready for that first Christmas, it came as a surprise to everyone,

And so we're spending these next few weeks preparing for Christmas by looking at different characters in the biblical story
and watching how they navigated the surprises that God had for each of them that came with that first Christmas

And what we've seen as we looked at Joseph and Mary these past couple of weeks is that while the Christmas story is obviously full of great hope and expectation and great news
There are also challenges, burdens and COST!

Joseph's Christmas surprise is that he finds out that his fiancée is pregnant and he's not the father!

Merry Christmas, Joseph!

And then as Paul pointed out last week, for Mary to accept the gift of being the vessel of the Lord means the death of some of her own dreams in order to receive the new thing that God was doing

And as an aside I wanted to say that last week when my friend Rev. Paul McAllister spoke, he used some political illustrations that made some of us uncomfortable or that felt slanted one direction

I sent out an email to all our small groups this past week to address it and to welcome conversations, had some great ones

We worked hard all fall in a highly charged political environment to create a space where all people are welcomed to follow Jesus

And to see how Jesus challenges ALL of us in many ways, including in our politics, and I wanted to again affirm that our goal here is to welcome all of us to follow Jesus and that be our primary goal

And let him give us the power and the strength to love and serve our neighbor, even the one who voted differently than you did!

It would be way easier to just go to a church where everyone voted and thought just like you did. What we're doing here is harder, messier and I suggest way, way better

Thank you for your hard work to stick with it!

Mary's Christmas surprise is that her life is going to in a different direction than she anticipated or thought

So here's what we're discovering as we look at these biblical characters and it's what we're going to see again today:

the Christmas surprise is gritty, raw, and real, meeting people right where they are

Stepping back and putting that first Christmas in context, important for us to remember that the situation and the context that these characters are in looks like God's completely absent:

Rome rules them with an iron fist and their government officials and religious leaders are almost all completely corrupt

And the gap between the Old Testament and New Testament is 400 years! God's been silent, no prophet, no word, for 400 years!

Some of you are coming into Christmas 2016 feeling like God's been silent in your life, too, aren't you? Prayers bouncing off the ceiling, trouble at every turn, no relief anywhere

Today we're going to again two very important principles as we look at Elizabeth's surprise: first, that God is not silent forever. He will speak, he will move, he does come

And secondly, that when he does speak and when he does move, it is always, always, always good. Even if it's inconvenient, even if it's complicated, even if it's challenging

When God moves and invites us into his great work and his great plan, it is always, always, always good, full of joy.

That's what we're going to see as we look at Luke 1 this morning—if you've got a Bible turn with me to Luke 1, if not it'll be on the screen behind me

Luke 1:5

⁵In 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. ⁶Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

My wife and I have three great kids but initially we had some troubles getting pregnant.

If you've ever experienced that or walked alongside someone else experiencing that, you know how painful it can be: month after month of disappointment over and over again

Luke here starts his whole story of that first Christmas with a series of three words that in the Jewish first century context shouldn't have gone together: they were righteous, blameless, and childless

They were righteous and blameless, not meaning that they were perfect or in biblical language that they never sinned

But just meaning that they were faithful to God and loved and served the people around them as God had commanded

So in the first century, if you were blameless and righteous, you were supposed to be child-full, not child-less

Because children were a blessing from God, so if you've been faithful and you've done what you're supposed to do, then God was supposed to do his part and bless you with kids

Kids in this time weren't just a nice addition, they weren't just decorative, not just so that you'd have something to show your high school friends on your Christmas card pictures and to show off to your Facebook friends

To have kids was both a sign that God was pleased with you AND it was an economic necessity—that was your retirement plan! They were the people who were going to take care of you when you got old!

God knew all of that, understood all of that, and everything about them and their lives is righteous and blameless!

And yet Zechariah and Elizabeth are somehow, incredibly, blameless, righteous, and childless, for DECADES—this is the first Christmas surprise:

You can do everything RIGHT and still not get the good Blessings you WANT

So here's what happens to me in early December: it seems like I come into just about every December with a bunch of stuff on my back that I'm juggling or worried about or that feel urgent or important

And initially to me, as much as I love Christmas and the whole season, initially the music and the lights and the call to pay attention to Christmas can feel a bit like an annoying fly buzzing around the edges of my real life

I've got lots going on, I don't have time to engage with or think about Christmas!

And every year, in the first week or two of December, I end up locked in this spiritual battle:
will I relegate Christmas to the margins in order to remain fixed on what feels much more urgent, much more important, much more tangible here in this life, in this world
OR will I allow Christmas to come right in, take up center stage, and relegate and re-orient and put everything else into perspective in light of the Christmas story?

Is my internal world going to remain locked and fixed on the good, bad, anxious, whatever of this life and have this be my primary story, my main way of thinking about myself and my life

OR will I allow Christmas to come in and re-arrange those problems, those opportunities, those worries or tasks or things that need to get done in such a way that they don't disappear, but they ARE right-sized and put back into their proper place?

Year in and year out, Elizabeth and Zechariah would hit major religious holidays like the Jewish Passover, they didn't have Christmas, but Passover was as big a deal as Christmas is for us today

And year in and year out for DECADES, Elizabeth and Zechariah would have hit those religious holidays having asked for a baby from the Lord and not been given one.

And every year they had to decide which was the more true thing, what was the most important thing

Is my pain and disappointment at the center of my life with God in the margins?

Or will I put God at the center and allow him to speak into and shape the very real pain and disappointment I feel again this year?

Will I cry out to God and continue to wait and wait and wait on him?

And sometimes life in that waiting period takes on a particularly crushing weight, doesn't it? Sometimes it's exhausting to wait, sometimes there's an excruciating-ness to waiting

And now Elizabeth is old and past those years of waiting, past those years of hoping that something changing

which in one sense is relieving, right? Hoping is risky, isn't it? Hoping is vulnerable, isn't it?

And I want to propose to you that part of what's so rich about this story is that they can be described as righteous and blameless even amidst all of those years of childlessness

In fact, I want to suggest to you that the life-giving challenge here for you and for me is this:

will we remain committed to the Lord even when he doesn't come through the ways that we think he should.

If the only time I told my wife that I loved her and the only time I invested any time with her was the weeks leading up to my birthday and to Christmas in order to get better presents

You would rightly wonder if I was simply using her to get the stuff that I wanted
you'd perhaps doubt my relational integrity and would be concerned for my poor wife!

But the reality is that I fall into the trap all the time of relating to God in just this way, and I think that many of you do, too

There's a relationship with God and then there's a relationship with God's stuff. And the question is, are we willing to invest in our relationship with God even if he's not delivering his stuff?

Are we going to God for God himself, because he's good, because he's loving, because he's generous-hearted,
because he's invited us into relationship, because we've seen him to be wonderful and holy and whole and the source of life and hilarious and glad
because he's God

Or are we really just approaching God just to get something.
And either we get it, and we're happy with God for a few weeks and then leave him and go about our business until the next time

OR we don't get it, and we're disappointed with God, grumpy with God, and we storm off in a huff for a while until the next crisis

Another way of coming at this: ***"what's my response to God when one of the primary ways that I would describe my life is _____-less"***

Elizabeth is CHILD-less and remains turned towards God, therefore she is BLAMELESS and RIGHTEOUS.

If you're promotion-less or raise-less or Christmas party-less or spouse-less or friend-less or my team didn't make the playoff's-less, what is your response to God?

We all have times in our lives when the "less" is a primary way that we'd describe our lives, when we would describe the main thing happening in our little worlds by something that is NOT there, something that DIDN'T happen or that we DIDN'T get

And the question is, will we turn toward God or will we turn away from God when we're living in the "less" whatever that less is?

A major part of what goes into Elizabeth and Zechariah blameless and righteous is that they remain God-facing even when God doesn't give them what they want

Because their trials reveal in them a heart that is not just going to God to get God's stuff. They're going to God to get God.

Look, our whole culture has shaped you and I to have one primary identity and one primary role or lens through which we do all of life and that is CONSUMER

And being a consumer is fine when we're out shopping for clothes or a car or even looking for Christmas presents for the family

But if we have no ability to take off that set of lenses and to shift OUT of that mindset in other contexts it will be toxic for all of us

if we try to relate to our spouse as a consumer, it will destroy your marriage—in fact, relating to any family or friend or neighbor as a consumer, it destroys all our relationships

And if we try to relate to God as a consumer—he's the vendor, you're the religious shopper, and he better meet your needs or you're going to go shopping somewhere else, then we're done

We'll never, ever, ever have the relationship with God that God made us for if we attempt to relate to him as a religious consumer.

He will always disappoint us in some way if we have that mindset and those sets of expectations on him because he's not there to be our religious vendor

any more than my wife is in my life to give me what I want for Christmas this year! My wife is not a Christmas present vending machine, she's in my life for me to love and serve her and do life together

God is not in our lives to be merely a present vending machine, he's in our lives for us to love and serve and do life together

And if we can approach him as a worshiper, as his kids, as his servants, for this is who we truly are in relationship with him

then whether blessings come or they do NOT come, we, too can be righteous and blameless, just like Elizabeth and Zechariah

My friends as some of us are in the midst of a painful, long wait that bears the scars of a broken world, we've got to wrestle with the question: Do I want God or do I want God's stuff?

And if the reality is that I'm going to God merely for his blessings, then the good news for you this Christmas season is that God's got something far greater to offer you.

Just like a great relationship with your spouse is way better than anything your spouse could give you for Christmas

So, too, does God want a relationship with you that is far greater than any other THING he could give you

In fact, that's exactly why he's sent his Son on that first Christmas morning

And Luke starts his story with this first Christmas surprise—a righteous and blameless couple that are somehow still childless but have continued to remain righteous and blameless into their old age

But of course because it's the Christmas story, all of this is about to get turned upside down

Zechariah is a priest and he gets the once-in-a-lifetime honor of going into the temple and burning the incense, a big deal, some priests went their whole lives and never got the opportunity to do this

While he's in there, an angel appears to him and here's what the angel tells 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. 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 before he is born.

Now not only is Zechariah righteous and blameless, he also paid attention in Biology class!

He asks the angel how this could possibly happen given their old age and so the angel strikes him mute until the day that the baby is born

so your first wildly important take-home is to not question an angel if one shows up to tell you something, no matter how crazy it sounds!

Just go with it!

Here's what happens next:

²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

Have you ever noticed that thing about how different people react differently to getting something that they've waited a long time for?

Some people jump up and down and shout it out and tell everybody on Facebook—that's some of us loud, obnoxious extroverts, I'm one of those

Some people are just relieved and kind of quietly glad or have this fierce internal joy—that's you serene, wise, settled introverts, I'm married to one of you

And some people get something that they've waited a long time for and you know what their response is?

It's about time. I deserve this. I've waited too long for it as it is. And I'm glad to finally get what I should have gotten a long time ago

Ever heard someone say something like that? Ever hear yourself say something like that?

You know what that is? The voice of the frustrated consumer who was forced to wait. Because a consumer mentality almost always has some degree of entitlement thinking loaded up in it, right?

Elizabeth not only shows her character in her waiting, her character is even more exposed here when she gets something she has waited for all her adult life.

She receives it with gratitude and great, great, quiet, deep joy

She doesn't respond with a self-righteous anger. She receives the gift with joy. She didn't need this to be fully alive, she didn't need this to be satisfied.

This is just a gift from God but she had decided long ago that child or no child, God was good and she was going to remain God-facing, no matter what

Sometimes our character is tested in the waiting, and sometimes it is further tested in the receiving of what we've wanted and waited for.

Elizabeth receives a wonderful, surprising gift that her heart has longed for for decades and will take away the social stigma

and she is not resentful about the waiting in the past, she is simply glad in what God has done in the present and what it means about what he will do in the future

And over all of this, is the glad and joyful laughter of a God who sometimes withholds things from us for seasons and times in ways that we don't always understand or that don't always make sense to us

But what we do know is that God has a plan, he's at work

and in the process there's refining happening because often that waiting exposes our hearts and our motives for why we're pursuing God in the first place

But the other thing that we see here is that God delights to give good gifts to surprising people, and it brings him great joy to do so

In fact, right after this story we get Mary's story of her encounter with the angel and in the middle of breaking the crazy news that not only is this young virgin going to have a baby

The angel also tells her that the old woman is going to, too

36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.

Here are more twists and turns in the Christmas surprise.

And this angel gets the privilege to telling Mary what God's doing all around her to put pieces in place that will change world history forever

can you hear the joy in the angel's voice as he gets to tell Mary this great news?

Your relative Elizabeth, the one in her old age the one who used to be called barren, remember her? Her name's changed now.

She is expecting, incredibly, wonderfully, long after anyone thought it was possible. God changes names—for nothing will be impossible with God [REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT]

Did you hear that my friends? The God that we're here to worship, the God that we're proclaiming, nothing will be or is impossible with him

I asked my small group this past week what they thought that meant and like 3 of them at the same time said the same word: "HOPE" Yes, indeed.

And He delights to change names. Your name, my name. Nothing will be impossible for him.

For every very real "less" that we experience in this life, God has a "full" in response

And it's not always this direct, not always this one-to-one, it doesn't always correspond quite as directly, but here's the good news:

God changes names, our experiences of hopelessness or family-less-ness or joblessness or childless-ness will not be the most important factors and descriptions in our lives

for nothing will be or is impossible with God

And he's so committed to doing all of this, that he sent his Son so that you and I might have our names changed, too.

See, before Christ came, the Scriptures describe us in its own "less" word: ***life-less***. We are all life-less and experience the results and effects of a lifeless environment because of sin.

All the "lesses" that you've experienced throughout your life are the result of this lifeless situation that we find ourselves in:

marriages that fall apart, friendships that sour, job situations that turn on us in the blink of an eye

And of course, eventually, our bodies start to fail—all of those broken situations are the result of the fact that we are living in a world that we weren't designed for.

It's place that has beauty in it, but ultimately life-lessness is what defines it

We were all headed for one ending, from the very start of our days the clock is ticking towards an ending that was not God's original intention

No matter what we fill those days with, all of them end the exact same way

And Jesus has come to take away all the shame of that ending and to free us from the death that hangs over every single one of his kids

He has come that our names might be changed from life-less ones to life to the full

And this revolution that Jesus has come to unleash is so all-encompassing and so massive that everyone and everything around it and even the first wave of what is to come here with Elizabeth are totally transformative

And this morning, the invitation for all of us is to trust in the life-giving one. The one who was sent from the Father to restore life to his life-less kids, to change our name

No longer life-less consumers, but sons and daughters of the most high God. No longer defined by the "LESS"-es in our lives but rather by the good that God has done to deposit his life into us

Elizabeth's Christmas Surprise starts with the years and years of pain and waiting

and the first surprise is that she and Zechariah would, somehow, remain righteous and blameless, even in the midst of being childless

And after she's given up the waiting and the hoping, she receives the wonderful surprise of a baby, even in her old age, for nothing will be impossible with God.

A couple of Take-WITH's for you this morning as we close, first to pull up the question we posed much earlier:

1. What's my response to God when one of the primary ways that I would describe my life is _____-less"

When I'm not getting God's stuff, the things that I want, even good things, even great things, am I willing to continue to pursue God and face towards God

Because I'm not just after God's stuff, I'm after God himself.

2. Where does the Christmas surprise Good News need to take center stage: "Nothing will be impossible with God?"

Given all the complexity of life and the various challenges you've had this year and the worries that you're maybe carrying into your December like I did

Where does this good news need to take center stage?

Where and how do you need to fight and pray and scrap and claw to put this verse and all that comes with it here in the Christmas story to good use?

I want to suggest to you that one way to do that is to memorize this little sentence and come back to it whenever you feel yourself slouching towards anxiety or worry or even opportunity and good things!

Whenever you can tell that your heart is getting super-fixed on the stuff right in front of you and you want that stuff, whatever it is, to be put back into perspective, just repeat this Scripture: "nothing will be impossible with God."

You feeling stressed and worried about something? You might have real work to do, it's not going to magically go away on it's own--but there's something bigger and more important that you need to start with before you go to work!

Say it with me: "Nothing will be impossible with God."

Nothing will be impossible with God, so what was it you were worried about again? Yes that matters, yes there's work to do there, but let's put that in proper perspective.

You looking back on your year and maybe you're feeling ashamed of something you've done. Maybe you're living with the consequences of that and not sure you can forgive you or other people around you can forgive you.

That might be true, there might be something you've done and it's awful and you need to do what you can to clean it up, own it, make amends

But you know the good news that puts that into perspective and you know where the power is to take away your shame? Say it with me: "Nothing will be impossible with God."

You feeling heady and excited about some new opportunity, some change ahead and that you're pumped about? New job, new relationship, things all looking great ahead? That's great, but you know what's truer, bigger, more important than that?

Say it with me: "Nothing will be impossible with God."

Are you a skeptic, a seeker, a doubter, not sure you believe any of this and you think it might be nice to believe all this stuff but you're just not sure that you could ever get there?

We're so glad that you're here and I invite all of us to say it together again: "Nothing will be impossible with God."

Amen, may all of us experience that this week as a part of our Christmas surprise.