

Is It True?

[Luke 1:5-13, 1:18-20](#)

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Advent is a season in which we are called to focus our lives on the coming of a savior. During these four weeks I will be preaching on the questions that are asked when people hear about the advent of this savior. Zechariah provides the first of these questions when he asks "Is it true?"

Zechariah was an old priest who had no children. It did not matter that he had a prestigious job, or that he and his wife Elizabeth came from prestigious families. It didn't even matter that they lived righteous lives. There was something missing. We are told in verse twenty-five, that Elizabeth suffered disgrace at the hands of her own people who called her "barren." To be dis-graced is to be removed from the means of God's grace, which is exactly how ancient society understood a couple without children. They must have been removed from God's grace.

So it is a pretty safe bet that Zechariah and Elizabeth started praying to God as a young couple, when they first discovered they were having a hard time getting pregnant. As the years began to pile up, so did the prayers that God would be gracious and grant them a child. Like the incense Zechariah the priest offered on the altar, he watched his prayers rise up to the skies, out of sight. But every time he prayed to God, he renewed his longing. As the priest of the people he longed for a Messiah. And as a man without posterity he longed for a child.

That is what prayer does, in part. It renews the great longings of our lives. One of the reasons we call you to return every Sunday to worship, a place of prayer, is that we want you to renew your deepest longings. That's because most of the things we do in life that hurt ourselves we do because we are trying to avoid these deepest longings. We work too hard, rush into bad relationships, and numb the pain with alcohol and great accomplishments. But at worship we make you join Zechariah and Elizabeth where the busy distractions of life are stopped, so we can face the truth and tell it to God. And yet, that is only half of the sacred conversation that goes on in every worship service. It is quite possible that the Lord could respond our prayers.

One day Zechariah was called to enter the Sanctuary of the Lord to pray and offer incense while the whole assembly of the people prayed outside the temple. Suddenly the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah inside the temple and said, "Don't be afraid Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. You'll have a son named John." Zechariah said, "How will I know that this is true?"

Now, I'm struck by this scene. Zechariah was praying for God's gracious intervention inside the temple while all of the people were praying outside the temple. And angel of God says, "Okay. You've got it." And a terrified Zechariah can only ask, "How can that be?"

We spend so much time praying the deepest desire of our hearts. Early on we were afraid that God would not give us what we most want. But eventually we become afraid that he will. That is because over the years we make friends with the longing. We trust it. In fact, we trust it more than God. For God to actually answer our prayers and take away our longing would terrify us because we wouldn't even know who we are without this old desire.

Zechariah was but the embodiment of Israel's longing for a Messiah who would save them. This longing went all the way back to Abraham. Zechariah's question, "How can this be?" is even an exact quote from Abraham who asked the same question when God promised him a son in his old age.

Like Zachariah, and like Israel, we get so used to our longing for a gracious salvation that we do not recognize the Messiah when he comes. We have grown more accustomed to asking than to receiving, and more accustomed to disgrace than to mercy. The disgrace with which most of us live is not that we are publicly branded, but that we are cast into a world that knows no grace. Believing that God cannot or will not intervene in our lives we are told that we had better learn how to shave down our great dreams, and settle for a little happiness along the way.

So as long as life doesn't become tragic, we know we can tolerate the fact that it will always be vaguely dissatisfying. A middle aged executive realizes he doesn't like his job, but thinks he is too old to start over. So he gives up his dreams of making a difference in the world and settles for a comfortable life. A young attorney works compulsively, for days, on a legal brief. She has long forgotten why she went to law school. Now she is just hoping that one of the partners will remember to say "Good job." Or like Zechariah and Elizabeth, maybe your dreams have been confined to the reasonable expectation of raising a child who will one day tell everyone at graduation that you're the reason he is valedictorian.

All we really want is just a little bit of happiness that will put a shine on the dullness of our lives. But the message of the angel is that God isn't interested in giving you a little happiness. Nowhere in Scripture, does the grace of God break into the lives of those who have learned how to pry a little happiness out of the world's hands. The people who are good at that like Herod, Caesar, and the innkeeper, never get a visit from an angel. No, the angels only come to those who keep the deepest longing of the soul alive.

We settle for a little happiness only because we think God will never answer our prayers. The question of Advent is not can you live with unanswered prayer. Of course you can. You've been doing that for years, by distracting yourself with lesser things. The question of Advent is do you still believe God can bring salvation into the tired longings of your tattered heart?

Zechariah gets nine months to think about this. During this time he cannot speak, because what would a priest, who does not believe that God answers prayer, have to say? According the Jewish Mishnah, we know that it was the custom for the priest after being in the Sanctuary of the Lord to walk out to the people and give the Aaronic Blessing: "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his

face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." But because he did not believe that his prayers were heard, Zechariah could not bless the people. There is no blessing in giving up your belief in a God who intervenes.

Thankfully the grace of God is not limited by our unbelief. When the child was born, Zechariah saw the grace of God and his tongue was released after he wrote down the words, "The child's name is John," which means God is gracious.

As Zechariah and Elizabeth discovered, normally grace shows up late, much later than we were expecting. It arrives late enough to make it clear that God's blessings do not come because we ask for them, but because God is merciful. It arrives late enough to make it clear that the real blessing is talking to God.

As many of you know my father died over Thanksgiving. Last Tuesday, my brother and I flew to Florida to bury him. Dad had left us when I was still a teenager. Early on I prayed that he would come back, and my brother and I did all we could to find him, but he would always leave again. Eventually, I grew used to living without my father, and I grew accustomed to longing for him. I was as afraid that God would answer my prayers for a reunion as I used to be that he would not.

Dad died alone in a rickety small trailer. But he once told a neighbor that he had a son who was a Presbyterian minister. And without knowing my name, this wonderful neighbor spent two days finding me after Dad had died. During the funeral I thought a lot about my prayers for my father. I vividly remembered all the prayers I had offered over the years: the prayers of a teenager longing, begging God for Dad's return, the prayers that he would appear at one of my graduations, my wedding, the birth of my child, my ordination. I had prayed that he would hear me preach just once. And I stared at my father's casket, I wondered whatever happened to all of those prayers lying on heaven's floor.

After the funeral we went to Dad's humble trailer to see what hints we could find of his life. Then the grace came. We found his Bible and his devotional journal which included his daily prayer list. The first two names on it were mine and my brother's.

I will never understand the lonely madness that drove my father away from everyone who loved him. But I am so thankful to know that he never forgot us, and to his dying day he was praying for us. Someday, on the other side of the river, we will be reconciled in Christ.

The grace isn't that I found my father in time, because I didn't. The grace is that Jesus never lost him. And the grace is that as I prayed all those years about my Dad, I was talking to the heavenly Father who will never leave or abandon me. The deepest longing of our hearts, is not for the things we keep asking God to give us. The deepest longing is for God. And if that is true, then even unanswered prayer is a grace because asking draws us to the Savior.

Although Luke begins his gospel by telling us about Zechariah who was unable to bless the people, he ends his gospel using the final verses to portray Jesus Christ lifting his hands to bless his followers. It is as if to say the point of the gospel is that Jesus does what we cannot do. He believes what we cannot imagine. He saves those we cannot help. He blesses us as the God who is with us. And, thus, Jesus Christ is the divine response to every prayer.

"Do not be afraid," said Gabriel, "Your prayers have been heard." What you will receive is not necessarily what you asked for. It is better than that. It's salvation.

Come to us Emmanuel. Come to us as the answer to our prayers whether we realize it or not. Come to us as the salvation for the deepest longing of our souls. Amen.