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Aunt Betty &amp; Uncle Zach

Luke 1.5-25

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96-year-old Mel Brooks has had an incredibly successful career as a writer, actor, director, and producer in television, movies, and on Broadway. Some of you may think of him and the Broadway show *The Producers*, others remember some of his funny movies from the 1970's. Other still older can remember a television program called, Sid Caesar's Show of Shows. Among the writers for that series were some of the greatest comedy minds of that time: Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, Neil Simon, and nine others combined to create some of the funniest skits ever done on television. Amazingly, this all-star team of writers **never won an Emmy award for their efforts**. The show won, Sid Caesar won, but the writers never did. After years of waiting and never receiving what they desired, they had pretty much lost hope. One particular year when the Emmy award for writing was announced and they again had not been recognized, Mel Brooks leaped up on a table at the awards and yelled, "*There is no God.*"

Have you ever felt that way? Has there ever been a time in your life when you hoped and prayed for something to happen and it seemed as if God was either silent, indifferent, or perhaps not there at all? Did you ever pray against the mounting evidence of the physical decline of a loved one's health only to see it get worse? Many of us have cried out in prayer that God would heal a loved one, and yet they died. Maybe you did everything you were supposed to at work and yet the business just didn't seem to come, or you were passed over, laid off or fired. Some people hope and pray for a child but are unable to meet the right person to marry or are never able to conceive or have had the heartache and disappointment of a miscarriage or losing a child. In circumstances such as these and many others, after waiting and praying and not seeing God do anything that we can perceive, many of us have questioned, doubted, or failed to believe. We feel ready to cry out with Mel Brooks, "*There is no God.*"

I wonder if Zechariah felt that way. In Jesus' family, Uncle Zach and Aunt Betty would have been the wise and devout older relatives. The kind of people everyone looked up to. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth are direct descendants of

Aaron, Israel's first High Priest. This couple is the picture of Jewish piety, yet they are childless and getting on in years. The one thing they desired most, hadn't happened for them until one day...listen to their story which begins in Luke 1:5,

"5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named **Zechariah**, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. **His wife was a descendant of Aaron**, and her name was **Elizabeth**. 6 **Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly** according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 **But they had no children**, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, **the whole assembly of the people was praying outside**. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, "**Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard**. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. 14 **You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth**, 15 for he will be **great in the sight of the Lord**. He must never drink wine or strong drink; **even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit**. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 **With the spirit and power of Elijah** he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." 18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." 19 The angel replied, "**I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news**. 20 **But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.**"

21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When he did come out, he could not speak to them,

and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 25 ***“This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”***

What a remarkable experience for Zechariah and Elizabeth! Through them we learn **holiness doesn't spare us heartache and hardship**. Elizabeth and Zechariah are exceptionally good and faithful people yet the one thing they desire more than anything else, a child, has not come into their life. They have waited and prayed and received nothing, except perhaps for the undeserved gossip and false accusations of some insensitive people, who questioned how righteous Zach and Betty could truly be if God hadn't chosen to bless them with a child. This went on for years, slowly eroding Zechariah's faith as steadily as the wind and waves eat away the sand and shore here on Cape Cod. Perhaps he felt as the psalmist did (Psalm 73:13-14), *“All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and am punished every morning.”* However, **sometimes what we perceive to be punishment may be preparation.**

Zechariah's greatest personal desire had not been fulfilled, but professionally he receives a once in a lifetime opportunity. He's chosen to represent his priestly division to burn incense on the altar within the holiest part of the temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah is alone in the Holy Place **following the routine laid out by tradition when routine service at the altar becomes a God-filled moment.** Gabriel, one of seven archangels of late Judaism and the one usually given messenger duty, visits Zechariah.

When Zach *“saw him he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him.”*

Zechariah a devout priest is leading worship in the Holy Place while a crowd prays outside...and he is terrified and shocked when God hears and answers their prayers. He's going through the motions of worship when all of a

sudden there's a message from God, and everything is changed. Think about the expectations Zach or any of us brings to worship. Do you expect to be encountered by God? Do you think God may have a word for you? Even when you may come to worship as a matter of routine, sometimes when you're just going through the motions because your expectations are low, God may still burst upon you with a desire to change you, and our world. *"Don't be afraid, Zechariah,"* Gabriel says, *"for your prayer has been heard."* God hears our prayers. God's power responds to and is unleashed by prayer. God cares about our heartfelt needs.

Gabriel's message is that Elizabeth will have a son who will be cause for rejoicing not only for his parents but for the whole nation. The child will be raised in the Nazirite tradition (see Numbers 6:3; Judges 13:2-5), which means he will be separated or consecrated to the Lord. He will be holy, have long hair, and never eat anything produced by the grapevine. Some of you may have heard of a man named Samson, he was a Nazirite. Zechariah is told his son will minister in the spirit of the prophet Elijah who was to prepare Israel for the arrival of the Messiah. All parents have great hopes and expectations for their baby when they learn they're going to have a child, but it's difficult to hear more than Zechariah did about a child who hasn't been born yet! What amazing, incredible, stunning news to receive!

**All those years that Zechariah and Elizabeth thought they were experiencing the absence, punishment, or discipline of God, was in fact a time of preparation.** God was not denying them a child; God was waiting to give them one of the most special babies the world would ever know. Imagine praying for something for years and then finally learning God heard and answered your prayer beyond your wildest dreams. What a cause for celebration! Gabriel must have been so excited to bring this joyous news to Zechariah. Can you picture the heavenly scene? God saying to the messenger, *"Gabriel, I've got a fun job for you. You know good old Zechariah and Elizabeth. Go and tell them their prayers have been heard, the time is now right, and they're going to be the parents of John the Baptist."*

Gabriel must have zoomed out of God's presence right to the Holy place just bursting to share the good news. When Zechariah hears the news, however, he doesn't start jumping up and down shouting, "*Hallelujah! Thank you, Lord!*" It's such a letdown when you share great news with people and their response is less enthusiastic than you anticipated. I feel badly for Gabriel. God gives him a good news assignment and Zechariah's response is not joy and gratitude but questioning doubt. We can understand Zach has his doubts. His question may seem innocent enough on the surface, but Gabriel's reply indicates that Zechariah's question **reflects a failure to believe in the power of God**. Zach doesn't see how this birth can happen because he is looking at himself, at his wife, at their physical ability and he feels inadequate. "*How can this happen for us now after all these years?*" he wonders. Like Zechariah, sometimes we can make the mistake of looking at ourselves and saying, "*I can't do this, I don't have the ability, the strength, the intelligence, the energy or the resources.*"

**Gabriel's reply may seem harsh, but it's a grace filled lesson.** Gabriel says, "*I have been sent to speak to you **and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.***" Gabriel tells Zach he's going to have a nine-month time out in silent retreat to ponder what God is doing. What's important to remember is what Gabriel **doesn't say**. Gabriel **doesn't say**, "*You of little faith, forget it, the deals off, no baby for you.*" We can all be grateful that **God's faithfulness doesn't always depend on our corresponding faithfulness**. In the face of our lack of faith, God remains faithful. In spite of our rejection, God remains true to God's promises. Regardless of our doubt, God is dependable. No matter what you do, how far or how long you stray, when you turn back toward God, the Lord is waiting for you.

Even Zechariah's seeming punishment of not being able to speak is further preparation and grace by God. In some ways, Zechariah is like the pastor who called in sick to his church one Sunday morning in order to play golf. While on the links he hit not one but two holes in one. St. Peter was furious and said to the Lord, "*This man lies to his church, skips out on worship to play golf and you*

*reward him with not one but two hole in one's? What kind of justice is that?"* The Lord smiled and replied, *"Who can he tell?"*

Zechariah can't tell anyone what happened. What's he going to say? *"An angel of God appeared to me and told me my prayers were heard and I said, 'How can this be?'"* By not saying anything he must keep his doubts to himself, and his wife and unborn son are spared unneeded and possibly dangerous publicity. During these nine months of silence God is laying the groundwork for when Zechariah can speak again when the community will gather for John's dedication as an infant. Then, when Zechariah speaks, it will not be questions of doubt coming from his mouth but words of praise and prophecy.

Through the prophet Isaiah God says (Isaiah 55:11), *"So shall the word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."*

**One of the greatest themes of the Bible is the faithfulness of God.** Jesus says (Matthew 5:45), *"God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."* God stands by the people of Israel even when their faith is lacking. Jesus stands by his disciples even in their moments of doubt and repeated failures. God will not cast you off nor cease showering grace and mercy upon you even when you, like Zechariah, fail to respond at first as God desires. What **does** God desire in return? **Our grateful thanks and praise.**

**Elizabeth**, barren in her old age, belongs to the rich biblical tradition of women who were barren who eventually gave birth to a very significant child that includes: **Sarah** (Gen. 11:30), **Rebekah** (Gen. 25:21), **Rachel** (Gen. 29:31; 30:1), **the unnamed wife of Manoah** (the mother of Samson, Judges 13:2), and **Hannah** (the mother of Samuel, 1 Samuel 1:5-6). Throughout Luke's Gospel we encounter the theme of a woman or women who respond in faith and praise while a man or men doubt or question. Elizabeth's first words when she learns she is pregnant are quite a contrast to her husband's. They're the kind of words Gabriel wanted to hear in response to his good news. She says (Luke 1:25),

***“This is what the Lord has done for me, when he looked favorably on me, and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”***

Like Elizabeth and Zechariah, is there something you’ve been waiting for, and it hasn’t happened? Like them, after years of waiting and never receiving what you pray for, you may also lose hope. You may feel like crying, *“There is no God!”* and walking away from your faith. Holiness will not necessarily spare you heartache and hardship. But is it possible that what you may perceive as punishment might be God preparing you for something you can’t handle or aren’t ready for right now? Looking back over your life, can you now see how God’s love and mercy were present in the midst of your difficult circumstances?

The hard truth is life holds no guarantees for any of us. The son Zechariah and Elizabeth had longed for and gave them so much joy would be imprisoned and murdered as a relatively young man. However, their son’s brief life helped change history by announcing the coming of Jesus. God hears the prayers of God’s people, even if God’s timing or God’s answer may not be what we’d like or what we’d choose. We can all be grateful that **God’s faithfulness doesn’t always depend on our corresponding faithfulness.** God remains faithful, in spite of our rejection, God remains true to God’s promises, regardless of our doubt, God is dependable. No matter what we do, how far or long we stray, when we turn back toward God, the Lord is waiting for us.

If you come to worship with anticipation and the expectation you’ll meet our faithful God here, perhaps God will have a message for you or maybe the Holy Spirit will do extraordinary things among us as well.

As today’s scripture ends, Uncle Zach is silent, Aunt Betty is in hiding, and Jesus’ cousin John is growing within her. We’ll meet John next week.

Until then, we’re left in a mood of expectation and more waiting. And we’re invited to believe and trust.

**Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. Have you ever had the experience of sharing incredibly exciting news and being disappointed by how someone responded? What were you excited to tell them? What happened?
2. Has there been a time in your life when you hoped and prayed for something to happen and it seemed as if God was either silent, indifferent, or perhaps not there at all? What was going on in your life at that moment? What were you praying for and what happened?
3. The lives of Elizabeth and Zechariah teach us that holiness will not necessarily spare us heartache and hardship. How do we continue to live with faith and hope when that happens?
4. Elizabeth is part of a significant line of women in the Bible who are barren and then give birth to a significant child – Sarah (Gen. 11:30), Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), Rachel (Gen. 29:31; 30:1), the unnamed wife of Manoah (the mother of Samson, Judges 13:2), and Hannah (the mother of Samuel, 1 Samuel 1:5-6). What does this list tell us about God's faithfulness and holding onto hope?
5. Zechariah has a nine month "silent retreat" because of his response to Gabriel. What do you think he thought about and prayed about in those months? What's the longest you've gone in silence?
6. Is it possible that what you may perceive as punishment might be God preparing you for something you aren't ready for right now or that the timing is not yet right?