THE GOD OF THE UNEXPECTED | AN UNEXPECTED PROMISE (12)

November 29, 2026
Luke 1:5-25

PURPOSE

To discover and experience Jesus Christ in our midst
To cultivate mutually encouraging relationships
To participate in God's mission to the world

WORSHIP

PLEASE OPEN IN PRAYER

RESPONSIVE PRAYER — Isaiah 2:1-5

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say:

> **"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."**

For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples;

> **And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.**

SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 1:5-25

5In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. 7But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

8Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, 9according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. 11And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 13But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

[18]And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." [19]And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. [20]And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." [21]And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. [22]And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. [23]And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

[24]After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, [25]"Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

BIBLE STUDY

Commentary

This week is the first Sunday of Advent, the season in which the church prepares to celebrate Christ's coming. The word "advent" comes from the Latin for "coming," and so Advent looks in two directions at once. First we look back to Jesus' first coming as the incarnate Son of God, and second we look forward to his final coming in glory. We are a people who live between these two advents, and we learn to wait for the second by watching how God's people waited for the first. Over the next few weeks, in a series called *The God of the Unexpected*, we will see how God brought about his promises in ways no one anticipated, beginning this week with a look at an elderly priest and his wife.

Luke introduces us to Zechariah and Elizabeth as "righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" (verse 6). We should not take this to mean they were without sin, but that their lives were marked by faithful obedience. That likely made their childlessness all the harder to bear, as many in their day believed that God would bless faithful servants by giving them children. Elizabeth even speaks of the "reproach" she had carried among her neighbors (verse 25). Luke adds that both were "advanced in years" (verse 7) to tell us that they probably did not expect their present circumstances to change. However, those well-versed in Scripture would already begin to notice the pattern that God tends to begin new things through women who cannot have children (see: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, etc.). These opening scenes are full of Old Testament echoes, because God is once again at work to keep his promises.

In verse 8 we come to the defining moment of Zechariah's life. Priests served the temple in twenty-four divisions (1 Chronicles 24), each on duty for a week twice a year, and lots would be cast to decide who would perform each task. Offering the incense in the holy place was such a privilege that a priest might do it only once in his lifetime, if ever. So Zechariah stands alone before the altar while "the whole multitude of the people were praying outside" (verse 10). The prayer during that hour, much like the Prayers of the People in our own Lord's Day worship, was all of Israel's prayer for the redemption God had promised — the "consolation of Israel" that we are told faithful people like Simeon and Anna were waiting for (Luke 2:25, 38). When the angel appears and says "your prayer has been heard," the answer is shockingly personal. Zechariah is told "your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son" (verse 13). God would answer the nation's prayer through this old couple's child. John would be filled with the Spirit from the womb and go before the Lord "in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children" (verse 17). These

are essentially the same as the last words of the Old Testament prophets (cf. Malachi 4:5-6). After centuries without a prophetic word, God takes up the promise exactly where he left it.

It is this personal shape of the answer that undoes Zechariah. He had prayed for Israel's redemption, perhaps for most of his life, and when the answer finally came, he could not believe it (verse 18). Abraham himself had asked nearly the same question that Zechariah asks here (Genesis 15:8), but Gabriel's verdict on Zechariah is plain: "you did not believe my words" (verse 20). He asked for a sign, and the sign he received was an inability to speak. There is both judgment and kindness in this. It kept Zechariah from speaking any more words of unbelief, and every silent day reminded him that the promise still stood. And it did stand. Within months Elizabeth conceived and could say, "Thus the Lord has done for me" (verse 25). Gabriel had said these words "will be fulfilled in their time" (verse 20), and Zechariah's doubt could not delay them by a day. The same is true for us in Advent. Like Israel, we pray for the coming of the Lord, and like Zechariah, we can pray faithfully for years and still struggle to believe God will answer. Yet prayers of faith are filed in heaven and are not forgotten, and God remains faithful even when we are faithless (2 Timothy 2:13). The question this passage presents to us is whether we will be ready to believe him when he answers, even if the answer hits closer to home than we imagined.

1. Looking at the Bible

- How does Luke describe Zechariah and Elizabeth in verses 5-7? What was missing from their lives?
- According to verses 14-17, what will John do?
- What does Zechariah ask the angel, and what happens to him as a result?

2. Looking at Jesus

At Central we believe that all of Scripture points to Jesus. In other words, Jesus is the theological center of the Bible. Not only does every passage point to Jesus, but the grand narrative of the Bible also finds its fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus.

- Verses 16-17 say John will go before "the Lord their God." Who turns out to be the one John goes before, and what do these verses then tell us about him?
- Zechariah offered incense while the people prayed outside. Read Hebrews 7:25 and discuss how this picture points forward to Jesus' work for us.
  - *Hebrews 7:25 - "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them."*

3. Looking at our Hearts

- Is there anything that you have been praying for so long that you have wondered if you should stop expecting an answer? How would you respond if God answered it tomorrow?
- How do you usually spend the weeks before Christmas? What would it look like to spend them waiting and preparing for the return of Christ?

4. Looking at our World

- Like Israel, we pray for the coming of the Lord. What in the world around you makes you long for him to come?
- John was sent to prepare people to meet the Lord (verse 17). Who could you help prepare to meet him this Christmas, starting with extending them an invitation to worship?

PRAYER

- Share prayer requests with one another.
- As a whole group, pray as Israel prayed, for the coming of the Lord (Revelation 22:20). Then pray by name for the people you could invite to worship this Christmas.