



Series: Advent: Season of Hope

Date: December 11, 2023

Speaker: Pastor Spence Shelton, Lead Pastor

Text: Luke 1:5-25, 57-80 - God of our deepest desires

Reading: Luke 1:5-17

Vision Night - Tuesday Night!

What an incredible account we get to dive into today. Before we do I want to encourage you to join us for vision night Tuesday night. While this is a member gathering we do invite you, if you are not a member yet but are thinking Mercy is your church, we invite you to join us. We are going to celebrate what God has done in 2023, we are going to worship together. I'm going to

take a few minutes and share where we believe God is taking us in 2024. I'll share our budget and a few highlights for the year. One big one I'm really excited about. Festive desserts and swag for all who attend as well. And hey let me say something - I realize that for our Mercy Northeast AND Union County folks I'm asking you to make a substantial drive. I get it. And yes we will stream it online. We try not to do these much because, well, I don't like meetings. Secondly - we want you to be out on mission as the church where you live and work. But sometimes we need to be one church in one location. We need to worship, pray, & get on the same page. This is our time to do that.

We are in week 2 of our advent series and we are over in Luke 1. If you have your bible go right there to the opening verses of Luke's gospel. Our theme for Advent this year is hope. Today we are going to see hope come to someone who had run out of hope. We are going to see hope come to a guy who... even though he had followed God his WHOLE LIFE... he still felt disappointed by God. He felt unheard and maybe overlooked.

WORKS CITED

Chandler, Matt. "Rebuke to Rejoicing." Preached at the Vilag Church 14 October 2007. Accessed December 2023.
<https://www.thevillagechurch.net/resources/sermons/rebuke-to-rejoicing>

And it's been that way for so long that when God finally does answer - he doesn't respond positively. He kind of digs his heels deeper into the bitterness that he's been standing in for many years.

And then God in His kindness breaks him of his pride. And in the surrender of his deepest desire to the Lord, a man named Zechariah finds hope.

Today isn't complicated but it is challenging. I want to pose a rather common question - **What is your deepest desire?** Will you trust God enough to surrender that desire to him AND that however He answers you...will you trust his answer will be good?

We are going to walk through the narrative and along the way draw out **5 truths about how God works on our deepest desires.** And here's what we are going to see - It's the SAME idea we learned from Mary.

Big Idea: Surrender your deepest desire to God and receive joy.

Our author Luke is intentionally opening his gospel with scenes that force the reader to feel the GRANDEUR of God. And to see that when we finite humans surrender our desires, our circumstances...all of it...we don't find panic. We don't find anxiety. We don't find the bitterness of unmet expectations. That's what we find when we HANG ON TO THEM AND TRY

TO CONTROL THEM. But when we surrender them to God...we find peace, hope, and joy. And I want that for you this year here at Christmas. But it comes on the other side of surrender.

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest of Abijah's division named Zechariah. His wife was from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

This is the first narrative in the gospel of Luke. Luke wants us to meet a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth (THAT FAITHFUL FRIEND OF MARY'S FROM LAST WEEK...) The simplest explanation I can give you for priest is pastor. It's not exactly a one-for-one but, he went to God on behalf of the people and then spoke to the people on behalf of God. Not only is he a pastor, his wife is from the tribe of Aaron. That's the tribe of priests descended from Aaron - Moses' brother. So, they have a holy pedigree. Today this would be like a pastor married to Billy Graham's great granddaughter or something. And on top of having a holy pedigree look at this next verse

6 Both were righteous in God's sight, living without blame according to all the commands and requirements of the Lord.

They weren't just from "good stock" - they were genuinely holy people. They followed the Lord. Luke

even paints with a broad brush in summarizing their lives because certainly, they weren't perfect. There was only one who ever was. But, if you had to summarize them - they were righteous in God's sight. Good background and Godly lives. **AND YET...this couple had a deep unfulfilled desire.**

7 But they had no children because Elizabeth could not conceive, and both of them were well along in years.

I want you to see that a couple living Godly lives was probably, let's just say it - living more godly lives than you and me. I don't know your story but that's kind of Luke's point. And yet Elizabeth could not conceive. Which means they tried. And the well along in years means they tried for a long time. You know they prayed about it. They knew the scripture. How many times did he recite Psalm 127 over others and say 'Children are a gift from the Lord! Blessed is the man whose quiver is full' while his is empty. How many of Elizabeth's friends had to get pregnant. And are now past that stage and maybe even becoming grandmas. And there is Elizabeth. **Faithful to God and yet denied this blessing.**

And not just any blessing. A fundamental blessing. Like she was created to carry a child and cannot. If you've dealt with infertility you know the feeling. You feel broken. Or betrayed or both. You ever felt...this is hard

because it will hit deep if it hits...**ever felt faithful but denied?** God, I've been faithful to you...For a long time, I've done my part. I've sincerely tried my hardest to follow you and I'm asking for this one thing...this good thing...and you are denying me? If that's you, I know we are early in the sermon but you gotta lean in.

What I want you to see with Elizabeth is God's delay had NOTHING to do with her merit. It had to do with His mercy on them and the world. It had to do with a plan much bigger than the two of them. And I need you to hear this this Christmas because maybe God's timing has been a source of bitterness for you. Here's what I want to say: When it comes to your deepest desire...to all of our desires...

God's timing is about his mercy, not your merit (5-7)

Listen, I do believe God blesses obedience to Him. He's set up the world so that we flourish under his rule and when we obey Him, we are blessed. Your faithfulness to Him is not in vain. NO DOUBT.

But, that doesn't mean we EARN God's yes to our prayers. If anyone could have, it would have been these two. So if you feel faithful but denied and so there's no joy - receive his timing as mercy, not an unpaid debt he owes you.

And on the other side - some of you are like yeah it makes sense because of how bad I've been. His denial is punishment. Listen, his timing is not because he is punishing you for not performing enough. After all, He came to Paul after years of slaughtering Christians. (By the way if you don't know that read Acts. It's wild.)

Here's the deal: God orchestrates events throughout scripture so that He and He alone can get glory for what transpires.

But what is clear - He never abandons His people. And when He says no, that's His mercy too. So whatever that deepest desire is...first I want you to know that just because He hasn't given it to you doesn't mean He's withholding something you've EARNED NOR does it mean you are being punished for what you did. His timing is about His mercy not your merit.

You know my professional struggle with this has been Mercy's facility situation. Pretty much our entire time I've been your pastor we've been looking for our next home. And it has yet to happen on my timeline. We've got several good people trying to find the next home for Providence Rd...and I get in my head either thinking God OWES ME. I've been faithful. COME ON GOD! Or I have a bad week and think...I deserve this. I'm a garbage pastor. Shouldn't have done this or let that keep going. And the whole time I look back and realize

his timing is about his mercy, not my merit or yours. He's doing something in the waiting. And I just want the answer. I don't like waiting. Maybe you don't either. But when the building I'm standing in was gifted to us, a young church, what could I say but God is faithful and merciful? I know he's got more for us. Let's keep going.

8 When his division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 it happened that he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense.

It happened - Listen that's always author shorthand for "God orchestrated the lots so that this individual would be selected for the assignment." Nothing just happens. Aside from God working His plan. You didn't just happen to be at church, your friend didn't happen to invite you this week. Here's what I'm learning - the longer I walk with God the more I see what felt like "just happened" was actually the loving hand of God moving for my benefit.

10 At the hour of incense the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified and overcome with fear.

Remember last week? Angels are imposing warriors of light. They show up a lot in the events surrounding the

arrival of Jesus. When they show up, people get terrified and the angel has to calm them.

13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard.

This is also true for you. Your prayer for that deep desire...has been heard. I don't know what it is, but I know God hears. We'll talk more about that relationship between you and God in a bit, but God doesn't have his ears plugged up. God has not overlooked you. No, God is the one who this same author - Luke - says in chapter 12 says He even knows the number of hairs on your head. God sees you. Next the angel says what will happen.

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. 14 There will be joy and delight for you, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and will never drink wine or beer. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb. 16 He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people."

Not only will God give you a child, He will give you a son filled with the Holy Spirit. Who will help bring Israel

back to their God. He will be not just be an answer to your prayer, he will be a fulfillment of God's promise. Malachi 4:5 God said to them LONG AFTER Elijah was gone

"Look, I am going to send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. 6 And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers -- Malachi 4:5-6"

God is keeping His promises. And btw that's one of the themes of Christmas - God keeps his promises! Talked about those promises a bit last week. How we who are in Christ have a new testament filled with promises to us. Like always being with us, working things for our good, bringing us into eternal glory, etc. **And we said trusting in God's promises is where hope comes from.** God promises he's with me, I choose to believe him even when I don't feel it and the result is hope.

Now what I want you to see here in Gabriel's announcement:

God's plan is greater than our desires (8-17)

God had so much more in mind than just giving them a child. He was giving the world a second Elijah. Giving the world a prophet to herald the coming of Christ. John the miracle baby would become John the prophet and John the baptist and eventually John the

martyr. God isn't stingy towards Zechariah and Elizabeth, He's actually got more than they could ask or imagine in how He answers their prayers. And I wonder if you believe this over that thing you desire so much right now. What if we closed our prayers for our deepest desires with Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3?

20 Now to him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us — 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. -- Ephesians 3:20-21

Do you believe He is able to heal you? To set you free? To provide a child? To warm a cold relationship? To restore a broken one? And do you believe He's got MORE than a simple yes for you? He's got a way to get glory THROUGH your dependence on Him. And that is what He's after. Are you willing to trust Him though? Even when you have to wait on the Lord a long time? When He answers you differently than you expected?

You realize that when our deepest desire is for anything other than God...that thing will disappoint us right?

We have Christmas presents in a couple weeks. Couple months after that - we have junk laying around our house. Because THAT THING didn't satisfy our every desire. Courtney and I have reached the...let's buy each

other a major appliance we need kind of stage. And in a year...maybe less knowing my luck...that Christmas present will need MAINTENANCE & be the source of complaining. How lame.

But what about the real stuff - Like what if your deepest desire is for a child? And what if God says yes? There will be rejoicing but...your child... will not be Jesus. Seriously. That child will let you down. Will straight up poop on you. Then verbally poop on you. Cost you tons and one day leave your house to go do their own thing. And call you for money. Your child cannot be your deepest desire because while it is a good desire children won't satisfy your soul. They weren't made to. And the reason we've got so many helicopter parents afraid to let little ones DO anything is because of fear something will happen to your soul's deepest desire. You need to put that burden on God, not your toddler.

For some of you older ones, your desire is spiritual and it is holy - like for a wayward child to come to faith. That is a GOOD thing. A very good thing. BUT - even a YES to that will not be enough for you. It will be awesome. But your child's salvation can't be yours. It won't be enough. Is God himself good enough for you? Will you trust his plan?

Or are you, right now, hardening your heart...digging in your heels in anger at God...in such a way that when he moves... you actually will resist Him. Watch Zechariah.

18 "How can I know this?" Zechariah asked the angel. "For I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years." 19 The angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and tell you this good news. 20 Now listen. You will become silent and unable to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time."

Now if you remember last week, Mary asked Gabriel a similar question. And Gabriel lovingly answered. Mary was also a teenage girl and Zechariah is an experienced priest. Zechariah's "trust God" muscles should be a lot stronger than Mary's. He should already know nothing is impossible with God. Where is the faith he's preached so many times? Well, when God presses on his deepest desire...that has gone unmet for decades...he can't bring himself to believe it. And we know he didn't believe because Gabriel said - you did not believe. So...God rebukes him. He doesn't kill him. But he does rebuke him.

Gonna talk like that? I'm gonna shut you up. Until it happens. He walks out of the temple unable to speak and the people realize...oh he's seen a vision. And for

the next 9 months - He's gotta deal with the shame and frustration of being indignant towards God when God was blessing him. All those first baby moments like prepping the house, feeling him kick, telling friends and family...and he is stuck being SILENT. He's in his own head and with his own thoughts the whole time. That's a LONG time to be in your own head.

But God is refining him. Giving him time to experience the reverse of what he'd experienced before. For years Zechariah had prayed and felt God was silent. And now God has spoken and forced Zechariah into silence. Maybe so he could **feel** that silence doesn't mean "uninterested" does it Zechariah? Silence doesn't mean lack of care does it? What I want you to see

God's discipline is mercy

Zechariah knows Proverbs 3 where God says He disciplines children He loves. And now He is living in it. And maybe if you pause to consider it - maybe you are too. The POINT of God's discipline is always to draw the hearts of those under discipline back to himself. Gabriel had said...there will be joy and delight for you in having a son and Zechariah couldn't bring himself to believe that. He didn't want hope. Couldn't believe it. Couldn't surrender to God saying yes to that deep desire. So God disciplined him. Put him in a posture of humility...for a time...so he could submit FULLY to God. God wanted

his heart. God was doing so many other things in this, but for Zechariah...he wanted his heart. And for him - **silencing him was the merciful discipline of God.**

Elizabeth doesn't get an angel, but she DOES get pregnant. And says what Zechariah wished he could have said:

25 "The Lord has done this for me. He has looked with favor in these days to take away my disgrace among the people."

Now what happens next is the scene we looked at last Sunday. Mary comes in and its awesome and Elizabeth's baby leaps in her womb. It's a celebration of the faithfulness of God right at the front door and its awesome. And then we get Mary's song and then it's time for John to be born and in John's birth we see his parents fully surrender to God...and rejoice.

57 Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she had a son. 58 Then her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her his great mercy, and they rejoiced with her.

59 When they came to circumcise the child on the eighth day, they were going to name him Zechariah, after his father. 60 But his mother responded, "No. He will be called John."

61 Then they said to her, "None of your relatives has that name." 62 So they motioned to his father to find out what he wanted him to be called. 63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they were all amazed. 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 Fear came on all those who lived around them, and all these things were being talked about throughout the hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard about him took it to heart, saying, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the Lord's hand was with him.

See they had a plan...They had planned to call him Jr. Little Z. Probably plans for him to serve in the same line of work. They had their plans and NONE OF THOSE PLANS involved a kid named John.

Did you say "jonah?" NO. JOHN. Look into this moment. The Lord had given them their deepest desire...SORT OF. They have a child now, but told them that **his way** of saying yes would mean their son would be about his heavenly father's plan, not theirs. And you get that right? If God says yes to you He's saying yes for HIS glory, not yours. If He gives you a child will you give that child back to Him? A spouse? A job? A grade? A friend? Whatever it is - will you put that into the service of GOD and not the service of YOU.

And the final moment of surrender is when Zechariah writes out His name is John. And boom, the Lord opens his mouth and he uses his voice to rejoice.

Surrender and believe, and you will rejoice (57-66)

We all, Like Zechariah, have some measure of wishing things were different. We have that deep longing. His led him away from the Lord in unbelief. Like - and tell me if this rings true - BECAUSE GOD HASN'T DONE THIS _____ I CAN'T BELIEVE IN HIM.

And the Lord in His mercy disciplined him. Where is your longing leading you? Is it leading you into dependence on the Lord? Or are you hardening towards the Lord?

I've watched unmet desires send people both directions. And all I can say is if He's stopped you somehow. if He's slowed you down in any way like he did Zechariah...praise him. And return to Him. Because that slowing down is His discipline He's giving to you who He loves. Surrender that desire to him and find hope.

Because listen - God doesn't need to say yes to you, but you need to say yes to God. That make sense? It's in your best interest that God says yes to HIS PLAN not your desires. And it is in your best interest that you say

yes to God as a good holy and loving father who knows best for you. Then maybe you will be able to join Zechariah who prophesies:

67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

68 Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and provided redemption for his people.

69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,

70 just as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets in ancient times;

God has done what he long promised He would. And now Zechariah connects what is happening in HIS own home with God's bigger plan. He doesn't talk first about John, he talks first about Jesus. Like his first words are - the horn of salvation is arriving. Jesus is coming! Praise God! When you get to a place of surrender to the Lord, your joy is in him more than your situation. So here's what happens - whether your desires are met or not you still are able to praise God because your deepest desire IS fulfilled.

Trust God with your desires & your blessings, for he is faithful (68-80)

Zechariah goes from Praising God to speaking over his son the assignment Gabriel told him he would have. A noble but difficult assignment. He knows prophets are rarely received well. Usually they are rejected and outcast. But the Zechariah has given him to the Lord. So he says

76 And you, child, will be called
a prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord
to prepare his ways,

77 to give his people knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins.

78 Because of our God's merciful compassion,
the dawn from on high will visit us

79 to shine on those who live in darkness
and the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

80 The child grew up and became strong in spirit, and
he was in the wilderness until the day of his public
appearance to Israel.

Parents, a little aside here towards the end of our message. Your child, just like John and just like my 4, they belong to God. Do you have a practice of 1) prayerfully releasing them to God? Like you pray to God - God help me shepherd them towards your plan for their lives and not mine? 2) We need to speak God's

good authority over them more. I don't do this enough. I need to tell my kids they belong to God and that God's plan is better than THEIR plan. That's how we raise up the next generation. Starts in the home. Starts in the everyday.

5 POINTS RECAP

God's timing is about his mercy, not your merit

God's plan is greater than our desires

God's discipline is mercy

Surrender and believe, & you will rejoice

Trust God with your desires & blessings, for he is faithful

Transition to communion.

HERE IT IS LORD...I gotta give this to you so I can receive these elements.

We are moving into a time of communion that our campus teams will lead us in.