

LIZ & ZECH

Present to Yearning People | Christmas Presence (Part 1)

Text: Luke 1:5-25

Christmas Without Any Presents

A busy mom entered the Christmas season feeling the weight of all she needed to do to get her house and family ready for the holidays. Working diligently down her task list, she realized to her dismay that she'd forgotten to organize her family to take that perfect picture needed for the usual photo Christmas cards. Surrendering to the reality that it was now too late, she decided she'd just pick up some store bought ones. While at Target, she grabbed five boxes of cards with a particularly attractive cover on them. Racing home, she sat down at the kitchen table, dashed out the words, "With all my love," on each card. She then addressed and stamped about fifty of the cards and dropped them in the Post Office mailbox as she was off on her next errand.

It wasn't until many days later that the exhausted mom finally found time to pause for a breather. Leaning against the kitchen counter with a cup of tea in hand, she thought, *"I don't have the energy to do one more thing."* Sipping her tea, her eyes wandered across the counter to the nearly empty box of Christmas cards. Picking one up, she admired again it's beautiful front. Opening it up, she closely read for the first time the pre-printed message the greeting card company had put on the inside, then thought of the fifty cards she'd already mailed out. The card's inscription was a clever little rhyme: *"This Christmas card is just to say, a little GIFT is on its way!"*¹

We groan with empathy for that woman don't we? The pressure to find and buy so many additional gifts would wither any of us. In her famous story, *Little Women*, one of Louisa May Alcott's characters says: ***"Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents."*** And that's partially true. One of the pleasures of this season is picking out that special something for that special someone to whom we want to bring a smile on Christmas morning.

But we also know how overwhelming and over-the-top the whole exercise can be. If we're not careful, Christmas can become a gauntlet of anxious searching and shopping and sending. We can get so busy decorating and dressing and dashing from here to there that we can go through the month barely really seeing and savoring the people around us or the amazing Person whose birthday this season is really all about. We might well get to the end of December more tired and indebted than before, but without being any closer in heart to the best gifts of Christmas. So what if we resolved to live in these next weeks with a different lens than Louisa May Alcott offered. What if we believed that ***"Christmas won't be Christmas without any PRESENCE."*** Let's take some practical steps together to open ourselves to the loving God and precious human beings who are, unquestionably, the greatest wealth of life.

Christmas Without Any Presence

One of the first steps in that process is to admit to ourselves, God, and others, that we and many of the people around us are YEARNING for things that we don't currently have and can't buy no matter what our credit line is. As we move through the Christmas season, the voices of the marketing machines are going to try to tell us that there is no emptiness in us that can't get filled up by some product or by just staying busy, but it's not true. While it's not exactly the same for each of us, there is a hole in life for a lot of us as there was for the two people we meet in today's scripture lesson.

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. To understand what is being said here, it helps to know that long before this story, God commissioned one of the twelve tribes of Israel – the tribe of Levi – to play a special role within the life of his people.² The Levites were ordained as the stewards of the religious life of the nation. Much like trustees, elders, deacons and Stephen Ministers do in our Church today, the Levites were the work force that provided for the worship services, instruction, community care, and benevolences that kept the spirituality of Israel alive from generation to generation.

Within the larger tribe of Levi, however, one particular family was given a more specialized role. God had commissioned the household of Moses' brother Aaron to serve as the priesthood of Israel. Zechariah and Elizabeth were both part of this lineage, which was divided into 24 working groups. Zechariah, we're told, "**belonged to the priestly division of Abijah.**" What this means is that in addition to the normal pastoral duties Zech performed in his home town, it was his duty twice a year to go up to Jerusalem and spend a full week's service in the ministries of the great Temple there.

Are you getting this so far? Liz and Zech are "CHOSEN people," in the fullest sense of that term. They're not just Levites, they are from the noble line of Aaron. They've been ordained to very important roles in the life of Israel. Furthermore, Luke makes it clear that Liz and Zech are not just privileged and prestigious folks, they are also "GOOD people." The text goes on to say: **⁶Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.** These were "salt of the earth, light of the world" kind of people (Matt 5:14-16). You'd be delighted to have them as your friends or in your small group.

⁷But... the Bible tells us, that didn't keep them from suffering a very big hole in their lives. Verse 7 says: **they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive...** That was a big problem for a bunch of reasons. First of all, it meant that while Zech and Liz by-passed some chaos, early gray hair, and expenses they might otherwise have experienced, they also missed out on some of the domestic joy and communal connections with other parents that kids can bring to a household. Secondly, Jewish culture regarded children as a sign of God's blessing and not having them would

have been seen by Liz and Zech's neighbors as evidence that God saw them as unfit in some way to contribute to his unfolding providence through the people of Israel. Finally, having no children meant that Zech and Liz had no social security safety net in their senior years and, as the scripture says, **[They] were both very old.** In other words, there was absolutely no good reason to think that their future was going to get any brighter.

Christmas Begins with Yearning

Some of you are in that place right now. Maybe you are living with the ache of illness or physical pain without solution. Perhaps you've lost your job or a child or the love of your life. You might have had a dream that you nurtured for years but it hasn't come to pass. You may be in a financial hole or amidst financial plenty but in an unhappy home. You'd like to be merry and cheerful, but it's hard not to feel envious, bitter, or sad in the face of what seems like others' blessedness. You yearn to be filled with peace and joy, but it seems impossible that will ever come. If that's not true for you, some variation on this story is true for quite a few of the people sitting around you or in your path during these next few weeks.

This is the fundamental context into which the Christmas story comes – not tinsel but tragedy... not holiday lights but harrowing darkness... not a horn of fruitfulness but a womb of barrenness. The Christmas story -- at least the prelude to it as told by Luke in the first chapter of his gospel – begins with the emptiness of unanswered prayer, of unmet hopes, of unrequited yearning for an infilling that never seems to come.

Hear this clearly: The story of Liz and Zech (and many others in the Bible and beyond) make it clear that you can be chosen by God, and be very good and faithful, and yet still have these holes in your life. More of us have these holes than is apparent from looking around. As Zach Eswine observes: *"You are not alone. Every fellow friend in the Christmas story, whether it was Simeon or Anna, Mary or Joseph, the shepherds or the Magi, the oppressed under Herod or the oppressed under Rome, even Jesus himself; they all experienced what it meant to encounter soul-ravaging and joy-crushing evils and pains. Their hope found anchor in deeper places and so can yours."*³

If you are struggling to feel hope, please know that you will find real companions in the fellowship of this church if you dare to share your story. This community is committed to being present to yearning people. You don't have to sing fa-la-la here. You don't have to sing at all. Feel free to tell the truth and lament here (Rom 12:15). You can cry instead of smile here. You won't be judged or rejected for that. On the contrary, you will be welcomed as a fellow sojourner by many of us who have our own stories of yearning. But alongside of that gift, let me offer three other deeper places for you to anchor your hope.

Further Steps to Hope

Trust that God is going to do immeasurably more than you ask or imagine even if you don't know when or how (Eph 3:20). Luke reminds us...

⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to 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 will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zech and Liz wouldn't just have any child. Six months from this announcement, they would become the parents of John the Baptizer, the forerunner of the Messiah, the one whom Jesus would describe as the greatest human being to ever live (Matt 11:11) Not surprisingly, **¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." ¹⁹ The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.**

You might be despairing right now of God ever doing anything in response to your needs, but I tell you this good news: God is as PRESENT to your yearnings as he was to Liz and Zech's. He's not blind or deaf to what you feel. I cannot tell you when or how he will act or whether you will even recognize his grace at work. God's timing may not be your timing. His way may not be your way (Isa 55:8). But this you can trust: God is always working all things together for the good for those who love him (Rom 8:28-39).

If you read on in Luke's gospel, you'll see that God strikes Zechariah dumb for six months, just to give him the chance to deeply reflect on His active presence and providence at work. I don't know if you need a Silent Retreat of that length yourself, but don't allow the constant jingle-jangle of this season ahead dominate your life. Find some places and spaces of silence in these days ahead to reflect on your life and look for the good that God is growing in and around you. The world is pregnant with the glorious presence and work of God. Be present to it.

And a final place to anchor your hope as you go today: Remember that God wants you to be an agent of his good in the lives of others this Christmas. Be present to the

yearnings of others. There are people in your family and mine who ache for us to be more present to them – to give them our full attention, to ask them deep questions about what they wonder or wish or pray for and then simply listen and empathize and encourage them. There are people in your house or your workplace or whom you'll meet in some circle of friends or strangers in days ahead that would be amazed if you or I truly locked in on them as if they were more important to us than our next to do list item, amusement, or distraction. They would be stunned and blessed if you prayed with them over some longing in their lives.

Once upon a time, the infinite God of the Universe came to earth in the flesh and gave human beings his full attention. He became **Immanuel – “God with us” (Matt 1:23)** If He could slow himself and take the time to make an investment in relationship like that, what do you suppose you and I could do in days ahead? So, wherever we go from here, let's remember: ***“Christmas won't be CHRISTmas without any PRESENCE.”***

Please pray with me...

Lord, give us the grace and discipline we need to seek your presence daily, to trust your providence faithfully, and to be present to each of the precious people you place in our path. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

¹ Adapted and modernized from a similar tale told by Charles Swindoll in his book, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart*, p.81.

² See Numbers 18.

³ Zach Eswine, “Preaching Lament at Christmas,” *Preaching Today*, November 2018