

“I Need Patience, NOW”

Scripture: Luke 1:5-20

The magnificent temple in Jerusalem was full of priests and worshippers, Jews and pagans from Europe and Asia and North Africa. The Levites, men from the priestly tribe are singing. Children are laughing and running. Smells of incense and animals and meat just sacrificed fills the air. The crowd swells for the hour when incense is burned and the air around the cherished Ten Commandments is thick with the fog of prayer. One man has been chosen by lot to place the incense on the altar to bring the people's prayers up to God's ears. He's not a high priest or a famous one, until now. Zechariah is a righteous man, a kind and faithful husband, a disciplined village priest who to his great surprise, meets an angel on this day. The people are praying. Inside the sanctum Zechariah also prays – for dignity in his old age. He's long since given up on praying for children so he prays for his wife, who's borne the grief of barrenness all these years. Zechariah has made his bitter peace with God as he fulfills his priestly function.

So, Zachariah is flabbergasted, undone really, when the angel Gabriel meets him in that inner sanctum to tell him his wife will bear a son. How is that even possible at her age? It's the obvious question, but as soon as the words leave his lips, Gabriel is offended. He tells Zechariah to listen more and talk less. He takes away his ability to speak for 9 months. Emerging from the altar Zechariah is a changed man. He gestures to explain. But it's hard to know what happened, or why.

Let's take a closer look.

In the first place, the Bible says there are times in life when we all need to learn patience. When your first tooth is lost it is hard to wait for the tooth fairy; that takes patience. When you apply to college, it's hard to wait for the fate letter. When to want a job or a grant it's hard to wait for the answer. When you send a text to someone you find attractive, it's hard to wait for the reply. When you take medical tests it's hard to wait for the results. When someone you love is in surgery it's hard to wait. When you are pregnant, nine months can be a long time.

Patience is something people have been struggling with forever. Three centuries before Zechariah, the Roman philosopher Cato famously said, “Patience is a virtue”. Why? Because most of us don't like to wait. We don't like the ambiguity of it, the uncertainty, the possibility of disappointment. But then when disappointment seems inevitable, we'd rather cling to it, than hope again and find our hopes dashed. That's where Zechariah was.

Zechariah was a good man and a sensible man. A faithful man, a local village priest, he married Elizabeth whose father was a priest descended from a family where people were kind and good, disciplined, and faithful. Together you would think their home would be just the kind of wholesome place that would be ideal for children, but they were not able to have them, which was a great sorrow for both of them. Long ago they'd given up on children and Zechariah was so disappointed that when Gabriel revealed God's plan for Elizabeth to have a miracle baby, Zechariah had to push it away. He couldn't take it in. He just couldn't keep that door open, even a little.

Patience is hard because you have to stand in one place and dream of another world that is yet to unfold, a world we don't know we need. It's hard to be patient.

In the second place, the story says that there are miracles in the air. I think Advent is a very hard time of year – not because its cold or dark, but because we all think we know how the story will end. We all assume we know what's coming, a baby in a manger. We create rituals for Christmas

Eve. We make plans. We like children to be surprised but we, like Zechariah are all getting a little too old for surprises.

We make December the busiest month of the year. It becomes counter-intuitive, to wait for a miracle in our own lives.

The story says that nothing is wasted in God's economy. Slower times are not lost time. Gabriel told Zechariah, "Slow down, long enough to take a break and take in something new." That's what they did. The Bible says Elizabeth stayed home for six months. She was pregnant in her fifties or sixties, and she had a husband who couldn't speak. It was a double whammy that sent them home to think about. Uncertain, or embarrassed, or full of wonder. Touched by an angel, the two remained out of the spotlight. Praying, communicating through gestures, glances, or tears, they remembered why they loved each other so. The Bible says these retreats when we acknowledge how much we don't know are not lost time, they set the stage for the next chapter, for a new miracle, a new birth, a new identity, a new beginning.

Sometimes when we are used to reaping all the advantages of a fast pace in life, we have to take time to learn patience. We have to re-think our priorities and reset our expectations. In another church I knew a man who had grown up in the town, been a terrific athlete and married his high school sweetheart, had a good career, a great business, and invitations to the best parties. Many people envied him. He seemed to float through every chapter in life until his first grandchild was born, and it was clear from birth that her multiple disabilities would mean she'd never walk or speak. Her overall prospects were unclear from the beginning, and she had some close calls. It took time to take this news in, but this man changed. He did not shut out this child, so different from himself, but did the opposite. He became devoted to this little girl, spending hours talking to her, helping her with the simplest things, enjoying her smile when words would never come. He was the one often pushing her wheelchair into church at Christmas, advocating for her with calm kindness. People in town told me he was a changed man, and these changes had smoothed out his rough edges. Formerly a go-getter, who enjoyed the fast lane, now he was softer. An unexpected blessing had made him patient. This little girl had altered his values about what mattered in life. Nothing is wasted in God's economy.

Now I want to be clear here. I am not advocating that we be patient with injustice. When Luke starts this story saying that Elizabeth and Zechariah were righteous, that doesn't mean they were just pious and prayerful, that means they lived their faith. They had integrity. They cared about the poor. They were known for generosity. Their baby John grew to be a man who hated hypocrisy. He got those values from his parents. Luke wrote the story of the Good Samaritan, and he never encourages us to be patient with our own impulse to cross the road or ignore inequity.

Finally, patience is an act of faith. When Gabriel met Zechariah that day God had a plan. God would be sending the Messiah and God wanted this faithful couple to have the child who would announce the coming of the Messiah. John would be the one to point to Jesus. God had already decided to give Elizabeth and Zechariah a very special baby because they were good and kind and righteous, but God wanted to give them the child in a way that would only increase that faith.

The clues that God is behind everything are hiding in plain sight. Both their names point to God's goodness. The word Elizabeth is named for Elisheba, Moses' sister-in-law, a reminder that God saved them before. And God would save the people again. The very word Elizabeth in Hebrew means – "my God keeps promises." Zechariah also means "God remembers".

Here in Advent Luke is urging us to remember that this is God's story. Every December, this is God's moment. Our job is to sit still and get out of God's way. "God is holding everything. The Bible says, God sees what's happening. God sees the empires that rule in Zechariah's time and in

our own. God sees how good people are mowed down, and how oppression is institutional. God recognizes the frustration of kind and faithful folks, who are in the habit of doing what's right. God has a plan. God is way out ahead of us. God is sending a messenger a gift this season. Let's be sure we don't miss it because we're too well defended, too sure we know what God has in mind.

When Elizabeth delivers her baby, she names him John. Normally children were named for their parents, so the family was aghast and turned to Zechariah. He asked for a slate and wrote the word John, which means "God is gracious". It was a sign that God was going to take the people in a whole new direction. With that Zechariah could speak again.

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Susan Cartmell at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
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