

Jerusalem – A Place of Waiting

Much of this week's devotions' content was sourced from Chapter 2 of a book by Rob Fuquay. 2024. *On the Way to Bethlehem - An Advent Study*. Cokesbury.

MONDAY – Signposts to Jesus' coming



Luke 1: 5 (NIV) *In 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.*

In this week's devotions, we arrive at the Temple in Jerusalem where we meet an elderly priest named Zechariah. His priestly division was on duty at the Temple, and Zechariah had been chosen to go into the Holy Place to carry out the priestly functions and give a blessing to the people.

To understand the importance of the Temple is to tell the story of Jerusalem. The Temple was built on top of the Temple Mount, which in turn was constructed over Mount Moriah, where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac, but was stopped by an angel. Today, the impressive gold-overlaid Dome of the Rock, a sacred Muslim site, can be seen on the Temple Mount.

King David purchased Mount Moriah and his son Solomon had the Temple built on it. After the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BC, a second

Temple was rebuilt and completed in 515 BC. Centuries later, when King Herod was appointed to rule over Judea, he sought to win approval with his Jewish subjects by rebuilding the Temple. Herod significantly increased the area of the Temple Mount in order to accommodate a much larger Temple (and other buildings). It was still known as the 'second' Temple, as services continued throughout the rebuilding process (FF Bruce; Bible History Atlas).

Even though the original Temple location is no longer under Jewish control, it remains a holy site. The Western Wall (of the Temple Mount, not the Herodian Temple itself) is the nearest point to the site of the original Temples, especially for Jews.

The story of Jesus's birth started at the Temple, but not with a pregnant mother. Rather, it began with an elderly priest and his wife.



Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, please help me to fully understand that Your temple must now live in my heart, not in a building. AMEN

TUESDAY – Feeling barren



Luke 1: 6-7 *Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well on in years.*

Rob Fuquay describes the priestly divisions and their duties, including the upkeep of the altars and the performance of ritual sacrifices. When a division was on duty, one priest among their number was selected by lot to go into the Holy Place, the room next to the Most Holy Place where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. The various duties the selected priest had to perform ended with completing his work, and coming out to the courtyard where people were gathered to receive a blessing from him.

Once a priest had been selected to carry out these duties, his name was removed from the list to give others a chance to serve. It was truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but not every priest got such a chance.

Zechariah had been chosen for this special duty. His wife, Elizabeth, was also a descendant

of Aaron, and they both were righteous people who had been faithful in keeping God's commandments. Then comes the shock – their sad burden: they were old and barren. This was more than a physical description. It was an emotional and even spiritual one. Not being able to have a child felt like God withheld this blessing from you. Outwardly they presented the joy and excitement this day held, but inwardly they carried a deep hope, even if they had long since given up on that hope.

Have you ever waited on God to provide a breakthrough in your life, but after months or years or decades you eventually gave up the belief that your prayer would be answered? What hopes do you carry within you? What are you waiting on God to do in your life, or the lives of others you love, or in our world?



Prayer: Dear Lord, I learn from this story that we have to wait in faith for Your chosen time and place. AMEN

WEDNESDAY – An unexpected moment



Luke 1: 11-13 *Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled, and was gripped with fear. 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 give him the name John.*

To arrive at Christmas, we have to contend with delays. We face stops that might feel unscheduled, but in truth, they are part of the journey. Waiting is the way to Christmas. This is what makes Jerusalem different from Rome. Rome puts us in touch with our longings. Longing means naming what it is we desire. But once we do, we go to Jerusalem where we put that longing aside and wait. You don't know how long you will be there; you just know it may well be longer than you like.

There is a small crowd gathered outside, waiting for the priest on duty to appear after conducting his ritual to give them a blessing. Among them is Elizabeth. The waiting seems unusually long, but they have no idea why. They will soon discover that while

Zechariah was having a once-in-a-lifetime experience, he also had an added surprise.

While Zechariah was performing his duty, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. First, the angel calms Zechariah's fears. Who wouldn't be afraid, standing alone in a sanctuary and suddenly being met by a celestial figure? Is it possible to carry out religious rituals and lose any expectation of experiencing God? Keeping our hearts open to hope can be more uncomfortable than what caused us to lose hope in the first place. Have you ever been far enough removed from a hope that you didn't even realize you stopped hoping? We cannot say for sure that was the case with Zechariah, but we do know that he was shocked by this announcement.



Prayer: Dear Lord, once again You remind me that You are my hope!
AMEN

THURSDAY – A muted blessing?



Luke 1: 14-17 *He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink; and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go before the Lord ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*

The angel gave Zechariah a lot to consider, as we see in yesterday's and today's Readings. The angel's news was too much for Zechariah. He asked how such a thing could happen when he and his wife were so old. Shock has a way of making us forgetful. Zechariah didn't recall how God gave the same promise to Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rachel, and Hannah and Elkanah.

Then the angel (Gabriel) declared that Zechariah will be mute until the message from God actually happens (Luke 1:20). This may seem like an unfair part of the story. Often we can see ourselves in Zechariah. We hope, have faith and believe God is able to do anything. But, if we're honest, we also know what it's like to lose not

faith itself, but just expectation that God is going to show up, change things, work a miracle, or transform some painful reality.

Do you feel like it has been a long time since you've heard from God, since you've had an experience of God's nearness and presence? Has faith become a matter of going through the motions? If so, this may be a good season to incorporate more silence, or greater periods of listening to God, into your life right now.

One of the lessons we can take away from Jerusalem is the importance of waiting. This stop on the way to Christmas challenges us to think about what we do with our longings. Waiting is not easy to do but it is a spiritual activity.



Prayer: Dear God, may we too learn how to wait faithfully and patiently for Your answers in our lives. AMEN

FRIDAY – The Advent invitation



Revelation 22: 20 ... *Come, Lord Jesus!*

The short verse above echoes the theme of Advent which means “to come to”. Just as we wait for the coming of Christ, the Bible ends with all the world still waiting for the ultimate fulfilment of God’s plan for creation.

Zechariah learns that his prayer is answered and yet he still doesn’t believe it. Zechariah has been going through the motions of religious life but has lost, perhaps, an expectant faith that supports such devotion. Possibly, one reason that Luke tells this story is to say to us, “You don’t have to be certain in your faith to worship God. Your faith doesn’t have to be exemplary in order for you to come before God. You can have doubts and still be accepted, because your questions, doubts, and even disbelief do not limit God’s power or desire to work in your life.” Just showing up is a courageous act of faith.

Sometimes God doesn’t give us what we want or when we want it,

but God is faithful to give us what we **need** when we wait and just show up. Zechariah and Elizabeth’s answer to prayer was part of a bigger story, a part of God’s story of hope. The key to finding meaning in our waiting is to ask how our longing fits into God’s bigger purpose. How might God use our situation?

Zechariah and Elizabeth developed a dependence on God so that when the answer finally came, they understood this gift was about more than the two of them. John was an answer for many other people and his life was part of God’s story. John was faithful to his call even to the point of death.

What God does in us while we wait is as important as what we wait for. So, as you hurry on your way to Christmas, take time to pause and pray and make your requests known to God. What are you waiting for?



PRAYER: Dear Lord Jesus, we await your Second Coming in Your time and for Your purpose. AMEN