

Pastor Caleb Duvick
Hope in the Midst of Hardship

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Series: Messengers

Luke 1:5-25

BIG IDEA - GOD HEARS YOUR PRAYERS EVEN WHEN HE SEEMS SILENT

Welcome to Two Cities, whether you're here with us or joining us down in Lexington. My name is Caleb Duvick. I'm one of the pastors here at Two Cities Church. The video you just watched is raw and honest. What you saw was a story about someone who had longed, who had prepared, who had expectation, and then they experienced heartbreak.

While their story is one specifically about adoption, that story speaks to the experience of what many of us have experienced in our lives, where we've prayed, we've planned, we've hoped, and then had something slip through our fingers. My wife and I have experienced that. Some of you know our story and some of you don't.

If you were to go into the kids' ministry, you'd likely meet four little Duvick girls there. We have four girls, 9, 7, 5, and 3. Sometimes people come up to my wife and me and ask if we're going to go for a fifth sometime and see if we're going to get a boy in the mix. They mean well, but what they don't know is that we already have a son who just happens to be with the Lord.

Ten years ago, we were getting close to our son's due date, and then we found out he had passed away and we were going to experience having a stillborn child. As you can imagine, that was an extremely difficult time for my wife and me, because we experienced what many of *you* have experienced: the reality of what it means to live in a broken and fallen world.

What people may not know about that story is how our son got his name. We were planning up until that moment to name him Ransom, which is an interesting name. It's

the name of one of my favorite C.S. Lewis characters. So, we were going to name him that, but in that moment, when we found out he had passed away, both of us felt like God was calling us to name him something different, something that was going to give more hope and meaning to the situation we were in.

So, instead of naming our son Ransom, we decided to name him Gabriel after the angel we meet in the Gospels...Gabriel, God's messenger of hope. I've loved more and more over the years the stories where that angel shows up in the Gospels, not only because it reminds me of our son, but I feel closer to the people that angel Gabriel is coming to minister to.

If you have your Bibles, you can open to Luke, chapter 1. We're going to be looking at one of those families that meets the angel Gabriel. It's a couple whose names are Zechariah and Elizabeth. One thing you are going to see about Zechariah and Elizabeth is they are a couple that experiences deep longing, like my wife and me, like Kyle and Naomi in the video, and like many of you. When the angel Gabriel shows up, what you're going to see is he is coming with a message of hope, not just for them but for all of us as well.

Today, we're kicking off a new sermon series that we're calling *Messengers*. In this series, we're looking at the meaning of Christmas through the first messengers of Christmas. Over the course of the next few weeks, we're going to be looking at miraculous encounters people had with these angels during the Christmas story, and then we're going to be culminating all with Christmas Eve services.

Here's my challenge and invitation to you this Christmas season. One of the temptations we have is to escape during this time, to escape from the anxiety, the stress, the pain, and the unanswered prayers we might feel. We do that a number of different ways. We do that by escaping into Hallmark movies or eating too much Christmas food or maybe doing a little retail therapy.

Listen. Here's the invitation for you. Instead of trying to escape, what would it look like this Christmas season for you to press into the hope we have with the long-awaited Savior? This Christmas, what would it look like for you to, instead of trying to escape, press in with Jesus Christ instead? Hopefully you're at Luke 1. We're going to dive in and look at the first story of Christmas with this couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. So, look with me, starting in verse 5.

"In 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. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord."

As we start to unpack this story about Zechariah and Elizabeth, one of the things you need to know about this couple is that they were faithful. Each of them is described as *blameless* and *righteous*. That's pretty high praise, because that puts them in the same category as some people in the Old Testament, like Noah and Job. What does it mean that they're blameless and righteous? Well, it doesn't mean they're perfectly without sin, but here's what it *does* mean.

It means people were able to easily point at them and say, "If you want to know what it looks like to be a follower of Christ, do it like Zechariah and Elizabeth." They were model believers in every area of their lives. That's an invitation for us. Are we the same? Could people look at any given area of our lives and know what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus? That's an invitation for us.

Here's another thing you need to know about them. It says they were righteous before...whom? Before men? No. It says they were righteous before God. So, when you look at them, you're not seeing outward religiosity; you're seeing inward integrity. They were the same people in private as they were in public.

That's a question we should ask ourselves. Are we the same person in every sphere of our lives? Maybe that's not true for you. Maybe there's the church version of you, and then there's the version of you that's stuck behind someone going 53 miles an hour on I-40. That can be true of many of us in our lives.

So, the invitation is... What would it look like to be consistent in every area, with who we are in public and who we are at work, who we are in public and who we are on the Internet or on our phones? What would it look like for us to have the same kind of integrity and character as Zechariah and Elizabeth?

Here's what makes it even more impressive that they were living out their lives this way. It says they were faithful in the days of Herod. Here's what that time was like. It was a very spiritually oppressive setting. They were being God's people faithfully when all of God's people were feeling increasingly marginalized, when they weren't taken seriously, when they were mocked, when they were misunderstood. Some of you know what that's like wherever *you're* at right now, whether at work or in a family.

Another thing you should see is not only was it a spiritually oppressive setting; they were living this out in, historically, what would have been a spiritually dry season, because when we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth, here's where they show up. A little Bible history for you guys. They show up at the end of a 400-year period of silence from God.

So, you have two parts in your Bible. You have the Old Testament, and you have the New Testament. When the Old Testament ends, it begins a 400-year period where there are no prophets. There's no new word from God. He just kind of seems to drop off the map in many ways. People had to have been wondering back then, "Has God completely forgotten about us?" You can imagine what that's like.

Four hundred years to not hear from God is a long time. Four hundred years ago was when the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock. Some of you are not built for that type of silence. Some of you go three days in your quiet time not hearing from God and you start freaking out. You get on chat and start asking questions like, "Why does God hate me?" It would be incredibly hard for us to be able to do that.

Despite all of that, we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth, people who kept serving, kept praying, and kept trusting in God. I love that Zechariah and Elizabeth get a shout-out here for their quiet faithfulness, because that's something we don't celebrate often enough in the church. Man! There are so many people here who are just quietly being faithful behind the scenes.

I wish I could recognize everybody. I just want to call out a few people. I want to say "Thank you" to all of the Community Group leaders and women's leads. Thank you for serving faithfully even when nobody sees it. I want to say "Thank you" to all of the people who are serving in kids' ministry and student ministry week in and week out. People don't even see.

So many of you are being generous with what God has given you. You're being generous according to your means. Here's what I want you to hear: God loves and celebrates faithfulness behind the scenes. He loves it and celebrates it. Your obedience is not wasted, even when the fruit is not always visible. God sees you, and he loves it.

There's something else you need to know about Zechariah and Elizabeth. Not only was this couple faithful but they were also suffering silently. Look with me at verse 7. ***"But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years."*** Not only were they faithful but they were suffering silently. You see, the thing Zechariah and Elizabeth wanted more than anything else was a child. You could tell this was a couple that had their prayers unanswered for decades.

There are a lot of things Zechariah and Elizabeth would have experienced walking through this. One of the things they would have experienced was pressure, because back then there was no such thing as retirement, so to have kids meant you had more help, more wealth, and more security. So, they would have felt that pressure.

They also would have experienced people's perceptions of them, because back then there was a stigma and a shame people had when there were no children in their family. It's like the opposite of today. Right? There's a stigma you get when you have too many kids.

Like the homeschool family that has so many kids they have to drive one of those big vans. Or it's the feeling I get when my wife and I go into a restaurant with my four daughters and the hostess gives us the same look you or I would give someone walking onto an airplane with an emotional support raccoon. That's how I feel.

It was opposite back then. There was great praise for people who had a lot of kids. They loved that. When someone *didn't* have kids or *couldn't* have kids, people would look at them like, "What's wrong with you?" So, there was this perception they would have felt.

Of course, one of the other things they would have experienced was just deep pain. Can you imagine your greatest longing being a child, and months turn into years and years turn into decades? Then, all of the parents around you start becoming grandparents. It doesn't take a whole lot for you to imagine what that's like. Some of you know exactly what that is like.

They were experiencing what Proverbs 13:12 calls a "hope deferred that makes the heart sick." It's that feeling you get in waiting rooms. It's like you're in a waiting room in a hospital waiting for news to come. You're in the waiting room of an employment office wondering if they're going to call your name. You're in the waiting room of a transition in life that you never expected or asked for.

When you're in the waiting room, you have no control. You don't know what the outcome is going to be. Christians often live in between those two tensions, trying to live faithfully while also suffering silently. When you're going through that...maybe some of you are going through that right now...you're going to feel pulled into one of two temptations.

The first temptation you might be tempted to feel is to feel defeated, to feel like maybe you're going through these things because you did something wrong and God is upset with you. You're going to feel tempted to think maybe you've committed some sin in your life that has led you here.

I'll say sometimes there *are* consequences that do come along with sin in our lives, but not everything can be tied back to a personal failure you've had. Zechariah and Elizabeth were not experiencing infertility because of sin in their life. This passage makes that very clear. Faithful people will still sometimes experience suffering that has nothing to do with our failures.

Here's the other temptation you might be pulled toward: to feel entitled. We're going to be tempted to feel bitter toward God, because we've confused God's approval with our blessings. That just comes as a result of the world we live in. We live in a very transactional culture where we have subscriptions and memberships and reward programs. We invest in things so we can get something out of it.

One thing I've invested in for years is Audible. I listen to a lot of books. I have this book that for the last two weeks I have not been able to listen to. I've purchased it, and it's driving me insane that I can't listen to this book, because I bought the darn thing. We can feel the same way with God at times. We feel like Christianity is a rewards program.

If we were able to honestly articulate some of the thoughts in our hearts, it would sometimes sound like this: "God, haven't I done enough for you to give me this one thing...for you to give me a spouse, for you to give me a stable career or financial security? Haven't I done enough for you to give me freedom from this chronic struggle with my health or depression? Haven't I done enough, God, for you to just give me a glimpse of some movement spiritually in the life of my one?"

All of us can slide into that mentality without realizing it. Listen. If we're only serving God for what we can get from him, we're not serving God; we're serving ourselves. Being righteous and blameless does not mean you're going to have a challenge-free life. It doesn't mean you're going to get every desire of your heart. It doesn't mean you're going to be exempt from heartache.

Zechariah and Elizabeth show us that you can be both godly and disappointed. You can be righteous and barren. You can be blameless and brokenhearted. That's not a contradiction; that's Christianity. Listen. We may not always fully understand in our lifetime why God does what he does or what he allows us to do, but that's when we have to believe what Charles Spurgeon said: when we cannot trace God's hand, we have to trust his heart.

So, that's where we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth. But in the midst of this, here's what's going to happen: an angel is going to show up with a message that changes everything. God is about to speak not into *one* silence but *two* silences. He's about to speak into the personal silence that Zechariah and Elizabeth are experiencing right now, but he's also going to come along and speak into a 400-year silence that his people have been feeling from him. So, let's dive in here, because Gabriel is about to announce both a son and a savior. Look with me at verse 8.

"Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of

the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense."

Every priest would serve two weeks out of a year at the temple, and something special would happen for those priests. By lot, one of them got chosen to go in and burn incense at the temple. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for most priests. Zechariah would have been waiting his whole life for this opportunity. This is the kind of thing that when you get chosen, your family and friends all show up, because it's such a monumental moment in your life.

I don't know if you've been here on a Sunday where you've noticed people filming the stage with their phones out. Has anyone seen that? Our security team does. It kind of freaks them out a little bit. Here's what's happening. Nine out of 10 times, it's someone's family recording because their son or daughter is doing something up on the stage. It's those moments when all the family shows up. They sit in the front row. It's highly embarrassing.

That's what happened with Zechariah. Everyone is coming for his big moment. We see he was chosen by lot, but he was not chosen by chance. Look with me at verse 11. ***"And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him."***

So, he walks in, and he encounters Gabriel, this angel. It's easy for us to yawn when angels show up, because they're as commonplace at Christmas as Santa Claus and candy canes and mutated reindeer. Right? But angels showing up is not a normal thing. It's not even a normal thing in the Scripture.

Here's what you need to know about angels. Angels are not like Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life*, just bumbling around. They're not chubby babies in diapers, like you see on your grandma's shelf filled with Precious Moments. When actual angels show up, people are more likely to soil themselves. When real angels show up, it is a terrifying experience.

Here's what you need to know about angels. Whenever angels show up, they're coming as either ministers or messengers. When they're showing up, they are coming to minister for God's people and care for them in a moment of need or they're coming as messengers at strategic times.

They're coming to bring a warning to God's people or as messengers of hope for people who are waiting, for people who are expectant. So, that's what Gabriel is doing. He's coming as a messenger, and he's getting ready to speak into Zechariah and Elizabeth's personal silence. Look with me at verse 13.

"But 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. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for 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.'"

Zechariah gets this amazing news that he has been waiting for all his life. He's going to have a son. Zechariah is also reminded of an incredibly important truth that even when we feel like he doesn't, God hears our prayers. God's silence does not equal his absence. So, not only did God speak into their personal silence, but he's getting ready to speak into his people's silence, which they've been waiting for 400 years for. So, Gabriel's message zooms out here. Verse 16:

"And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and 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."

This announcement Gabriel just gave to Zechariah would have immediately triggered people's minds, especially a priest like Zechariah. The people's minds would have jumped back to the book of Malachi. Now, for most of you, Malachi is a book you can only find in the table of contents. Right? If I asked you to turn there, you'd be like, "Oh, where's that?"

Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. It's the last words he gave his people before this 400-year gap in history. I want to read for you what the last two verses of that book say. Malachi 4:5-6: ***"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers..."***

When God speaks again, he picks up right where he left off 400 years before. God is saying a messenger is coming in the spirit of Elijah. He's going to be wild, and he's going to pave the way for reuniting God the Father with his children. That can only mean one thing. At long last, God is going to be sending the Savior and Messiah that he had promised long before. He's going to be sending a prophet ahead of him.

Here's what he's saying: "I still see you. I see your greatest need, and I'm about to do something about it." This is something that should have had Zechariah pumped out of his mind. It's what he was personally waiting for. It's what the people have been waiting for. But let's look at how he responds. Look with me at verse 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.'"***

Marriage tip. Listen. It's okay, guys, for you to call yourself old. It's probably a bad idea for you to call your wife old, so try "advanced in years" instead. All right? It might go over a little better. But here's what he says: "How shall I know this?" John Piper says whenever we encounter the promises of God, we respond in one of two ways: with faith or unbelief. Zechariah clearly chose the latter.

Can you imagine being so skeptical that when a literal angel shows up and brings you this kind of news your first impulse is to say, "Yeah, I'm going to need to talk to your manager about that"? That's essentially what he's doing here, because in spite of Zechariah's faithfulness, his heart is full of doubt.

Listen. There are different kinds of doubt. Not all doubt is the same. There's an honest doubt we can have that says, "I believe, but would you help my unbelief?" Then there's another type of doubt, a hard-hearted doubt that turns into full-on unbelief. God welcomes the first, but he lovingly confronts the second.

Next week, we're going to look at the story of Mary, and she has a very similar encounter with Gabriel. Both she and Zechariah ask questions, but the tone between their two questions are worlds apart from each other. Mary asks, "How will this be?" Her heart is full of faith. She just wants to understand. There's a lot of trust in what she's saying. Zechariah is different. He says, "How shall I know this?" His heart is full of cynicism.

If we're not careful, our disappointments can harden us to have hearts full of unbelief and cynicism like Zechariah. In spite of everything, Zechariah looks at his and his wife's circumstances. He hears what Gabriel is saying, and he's saying, "That's impossible." So, what is he doing? He's asking for more proof. He's asking for more assurances. He's asking for more signs.

Before we judge Zechariah too harshly, the reality is many of us would have done the exact same thing, because cynicism is the currency of our culture. If you have too much hope, people think you're naive. Unfortunately for us, this same kind of cynicism has crept into the church.

Unbelief can be this really sneaky thing. We can be doing all the things. We can be going to church. We can be in community. We can be leading community. We can be serving faithfully, giving generously, and not believe. There is such thing as having knowledge and action without belief.

Here's how I've seen this in our church. Many of you are in Community Groups, and I can bet that many of you, every single week, are praying for someone's healing or for someone to be restored. But how many of us would be shocked if God actually answered that prayer?

Or here's another way I see this. I had a conversation with a guy after The Heights. We were specifically talking about Clayton King, the night he came and gave that invitation. I said, "Dude, what did you think about that?" He said, "Honestly, I felt ashamed." I said, "Tell me about that."

He said, "When he asked everybody to bow their heads so they could take a moment to give their life to Christ, I thought maybe five or six people would respond." Then he said he opened his eyes and saw over 100 people saying, "I want to give my life to Christ." He said, "I just felt so much guilt because I did not believe that God could actually do that here."

Why do we struggle to believe that God can actually move? Why do we struggle to believe that God can still work in our lives and in the life of this church? Maybe it's because we don't believe in our hearts the way we ought to. That was Zechariah, and that's certainly, if we're being honest, many of us. So, what happens when Zechariah responds this way? Here's how Gabriel responds to his unbelief. You can almost hear his frustration here.

"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. 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.'

And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. 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."

Sometimes the thing we need the most in our times of unbelief is godly discipline. Sometimes the thing God is going to use to break through your sin or unbelief is a season of discipline, like what Zechariah had to experience. Here's what you need to know about God's discipline in our lives if you're a believer: discipline is not the same as punishment.

If you are a genuine follower of Jesus, I need you to hear this. In seasons of discipline, the pain you are feeling is not payback. It's not karma. It's not penance. It's not punishment. What you need to remember is that Jesus has already taken all the punishment you deserved on the cross. He became sin for us.

When he said, "It is finished," he didn't mean "It's mostly finished, and you'll pay back the rest later." He said, "It's done. I've taken it all for you." So, when you face the pain of discipline as a Christian, it's not punishment. Here's what you *do* need to know about discipline: discipline is a form of grace in the life of a believer.

Discipline is not payback; it's bring-back. It's God's invitation for us to step back into the love and obedience we were made and saved for. It's an invitation for us to stop running away from him in unbelief. You see, discipline was meant to show us the heart of a loving father. Where do I get that? I want you to see this in Hebrews 12.

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." He disciplines us for our good that we may share his holiness. "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

Listen. If you're experiencing the discipline of the Lord, I want to remind you today you are experiencing it because God loves you. You're going to be tempted to feel the opposite. "God is angry with me." No. One of the things you're going to have to tell yourself in seasons of discipline over and over is that God loves you. You need other people in your life reminding you, "God loves you. He's doing this because he cares for you."

One of the ways we talk about love here at Two Cities is it's a commitment to someone's greatest good. Sometimes the thing you need the most is going to be one of the things that's hardest for you to experience, but God is doing it out of a love for you because he wants your good. He wants something better for you. He wants to form something in you.

You know, the words *discipline* and *discipleship* come from the same root. Sometimes, when you're going through discipline, it's because God wants to form you more into the image of his Son. Maybe when you're going through discipline, it's because God wants to work some humility in your life.

Maybe you're going through a humbling season. Maybe you've lost your job. Maybe you're going through a transition, something you didn't expect. My hope is that when you look back on this season, it's not that God was trying to embarrass you; he was trying to instill humility in your life. He was trying to break the self-reliance that so many of us have. Maybe through his discipline, he's trying to create more and more of a dependence in you.

Or maybe he's trying to work perseverance in you. Maybe you're going through a really hard season where your marriage is taking a lot of work, where your work is challenging you day in and day out, and you're in a heavy season of parenting. Maybe what God is trying to do in that is strengthen the muscles of perseverance you don't quite have yet so you can endure to the end.

Listen. If you're in a season of discipline, here's what you need to ask: "Where is God inviting me to return? Where is God inviting me to repent or to trust in him more deeply?" God uses discipline as a grace to us. Here's what he also does: God uses discipline as a sign to others.

See, ironically, God gave Zechariah exactly what he wanted. Zechariah wanted a sign. "How do I know this is going to take place?" Well, God says, "All right. You can have nine months of humbling silence." Some of you parents are like, "Man, if the Lord wanted to discipline my kids with nine *minutes* of silence, I'd receive it. Lord, do it." Right?

Listen. Discipline is not just about correction; it's about communication. He doesn't want to just communicate something to us. He uses it as a way to communicate to those around us. When Zechariah experienced the discipline of God, everybody else around him saw it and said, "God is doing something. What is God saying right now?"

In the same way, God uses our discipline as a signpost for others. When you have someone in your life who falls into sexual sin... God uses that as a wake-up for us, does he not? It's like a megaphone that's shouting, "You are not immune. You need guardrails in your life. You need to take sin seriously." Because when other people hit the wall of consequences, it's not just their warning; it's ours.

Life is too short to only learn from our mistakes. God graciously gives the mistakes of others for us to be learned and to be formed. So, whenever you see someone going through a season of discipline, it's an invitation for us to ask, "Where am I drifting? Where am I not trusting in God? Where do I need to align myself more with God so I don't experience similar things in my life?" Discipline for believers is grace and a sign.

So, how does this story end? I'm going to summarize it. It's a long chapter. Here's what you're going to see if you keep reading. You can read this with your Community Group. Here's the rest of the story. God promised that all these things were going to happen, and that's exactly what he did.

Zechariah went home mute for nine months. Shortly after they got home, Elizabeth realized she was pregnant. Nine months later, she gave birth to a son that they called John, just like the angel said they would. Isn't it amazing that even in spite of our doubts God is still gracious to us? Isn't that such good news?

Then, here's what we see in verse 64: "***And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.***" You see, God's discipline did exactly what God wanted it to. Zechariah is restored. Once again, Zechariah is filled with faith. Zechariah's heart is filled with praise. What follows here at the end of the story is one of

the most famous songs in all of Scripture. I just want to read it over you. Starting in verse 67, it says:

"And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'"

There are two last things I want us all to see today. The last passage in Zechariah and Elizabeth's story shows us where their ultimate and greatest joy was. When you look at this song, you see that their greatest joy is not in having a child. Their greatest joy is not in John. Yes, they were thrilled, doubtless, and grateful for the gift God had given them, but where was their joy?

Their greatest joy was not that God spoke into their *personal* silence but that he spoke into the *people's* silence. At long last, he was sending the long-awaited Savior and Messiah, and they were overjoyed that they got to simply have a piece in that story about Jesus Christ.

What we learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth is we can have that same joy no matter what our circumstances are. Not because he gives us all of the things we want. That's not the reality of life. What we *do* have...all of us...is we have Jesus Christ. We can have joy in being connected in some small way to the story of who he is and what he's doing.

Here's the second thing we need to see: it's our turn to believe now. At the beginning of the story, a messenger appeared on the scene with a message for Zechariah. Zechariah was called to believe in that message. He unfortunately didn't do that. He had to learn the hard way. Years later, Zechariah's son John grew up, and he became a messenger himself. He came with a message for the whole world, including you and me.

Here's what was at the core of John the Baptist's message: "God still sees you. He knows your greatest need, and he is sending a king and savior to do something about it." Here's

the invitation as we receive that message: Would you believe, would you repent of your sins, and would you turn to him?

You see, that's what all of this is about. The whole reason Gabriel showed up, the whole reason he sent John the Baptist, the whole reason Jesus did and said everything he did on this earth... All of the things God gives us in our lives are given so that you and I would believe. That is our call to respond today.

I just want to invite everybody, no matter where you're at. Would you bow your heads and close your eyes? I want you to consider this question: Where are you at in this story? Maybe, for some of you, you're the one who is faithful but still waiting. You feel like you're doing your best to walk blamelessly before God, but you feel barren, disappointed, stuck in the waiting room.

The invitation for you is... Would you keep showing up? Would you pray again where you've stopped praying? God hears you even when he feels silent at times. Would you ask him in this moment, "Lord, help me to be faithful even here"? For some of you, maybe you're in a season of discipline. You know you've been living in unbelief or disobedience, and you're feeling the consequences. Remember, this is not payback; it's bring-back.

Maybe the reason you're going through this season is so you can be reminded of the love of your Father, not that there's a judge who's angry at you. Maybe the invitation for you is to ask, "Lord, what are you teaching me? Where are you trying to call me back to you?" Let me encourage you. Don't waste this season. Let it drive you back to God's Word, his people, his grace.

Maybe today you're cynical or unbelieving. You're around the things of God, church, community, and serving, but deep down, you don't truly expect God to move. Would you confess that to God today? May your prayer be, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. Help me to expect you to move again."

Or maybe you're in the last group of people here today, and you're far from God altogether. Maybe you're not a Christian yet. Maybe you showed up here today and you realize, "Man, I'm not that." If that's you, John's message, the message of Jesus, the message of Christmas, is this: God sees you. He sees your sin, he sees your need, he sees your pain, and he has sent a Savior King.

Listen. Jesus lived the life you couldn't live. He died the death you deserve, and he rose again so you could be forgiven and be made new. Today, right where you are, would you believe that? Would you repent of your sins? Would you turn to Jesus and trust that Jesus is enough to bring you back to God? Wherever you're at, would you pray with me?

Father, we thank you for seeing us, for hearing us, and speaking into our silence through Jesus. Father, would you help us respond with faith where we doubt, obedience where we've wandered, and trust where we're waiting? God, shape us into people who believe in you again. It's in Christ's name we pray, amen.