

ADVENT: WEEK TWO

day 9

Zechariah, Counter-intuitive

Luke 1:5-20, 59-64



Our familiarity with the story can make us miss how radically counterintuitive Christmas really is. The Christmas story is filled with counterintuitive moments when the people of God were called upon to believe and do things that seemed to be either against their best interests, or against all reason...or just a waste of time. There were a series of break through moments in the Christmas story, but every one of them began with an act of faith and obedience that was counterintuitive. Like the one found in today's reading.

Maybe the very first counterintuitive truth we need to recognize is that obedience alone does not always bring break through. Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous, "careful to obey all that God said." When we read those words, we don't expect to read the words that immediately follow...words of pain, of un-fulfilled promise... words that highlight not blessing, but the absence of blessing.

And that leads to another counterintuitive truth: never give up on the blessings promised to those who faithfully follow and serve the Lord, because what brings break through is careful obedience plus continued prayer. Zechariah had been chosen to burn incense that day (an act that symbolized prayer). As he burns the incense, he prays...again. When Gabriel suddenly shows up in the room, he acknowledges the amazing fact that the old man had never stopped praying.

And in addition to careful obedience and faithful prayer, there is also a specific point of action. Not to put too fine a point on it, but John was not immaculately conceived. If Zechariah had gone home and kept carefully obeying and faithfully praying, but never took the specific action required to conceive the baby John...then there would have been no break through. We often over-spiritualize the break through, leaving it all in God's hands. But God almost always chooses to work through us, not apart from us. Continued prayer, followed by specific action brought about the break through for which obedience had paved the way.

But there's more. After receiving the amazing prophetic word from Gabriel about his son, John, the old man's response is, "How can I be sure this will happen?" This is a very different response from that of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Her question had to do with what she knew about biology, so her question was "how can this happen?".

But with Zechariah the question was "how can I be sure this will happen?". Mary's response was born of confusion and wonder. Zechariah's response was born of doubt.

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Apart from Gabriel's response being one of the funniest moments in the Bible, there is a serious lesson to learn here. Doubt rendered Zechariah unable to testify to the presence, love, faithfulness, and power of God. Zechariah had just experienced all those things, but doubt stole his testimony. You cannot communicate the true character of God to those around you if you are consumed with doubt. But at the end of this opening story of Christmas, the baby has been born. Now, remember what Gabriel had told Zechariah: "you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born." Given the circumstances, I'm sure that Zechariah had replayed those words in his mind a thousand times for nine months. Finally, the day arrives in which the baby arrives...but his voice does not return. And the next day...no voice. And the next day...no voice...and now more than a week has passed. Here he is, standing on the promise of God, and the promise seems to have failed. Surely he felt disappointed, angry, confused, hopeless, and forgotten. But then comes what may be the most counterintuitive moment in the whole Advent story. They ask him what the boy's name will be. Think of the temptation he faced in that moment...the temptation to stop obeying God. After all, God had broken His promise to him, right? But Zechariah was still committed to obedience, even in the face of confusion, disappointment and anger. He wrote, "His name is John." And immediately he could speak. Zechariah was set free by an act of counterintuitive, faithful obedience in the face of tremendous disappointment.

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prayer:



Jesus, thank You for Your promises to me. Please give me grace to keep on praying, even when I feel that the cause is a lost one. Holy SPirit, help me recognize the actions I need to take in partnership with Your work in my life. And please give me the courage to stand in faith and testify to Your faithfulness instead of opening the door to doubt. In Jesus's name, amen.

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