



WHERE LIFE & PURPOSE CONNECT

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 3, 2023

Weekly Prayer

Holy God of Hope, give me ears to hear and hearts to trust the promises you offer to me in this season of Advent. I offer myself to you today, open to your abundant grace and promises of hope. Amen.

Monday, December 4

Scripture: Luke 1:5-13

During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old. One day Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. Following the customs of priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense. All the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering. An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John.

Observation: As this scripture begins, Zechariah has been chosen to enter into the Sanctuary. For Zechariah, this was a high honor that was reserved for very few – in fact, this would likely be the only time in his life that he would have the honor to perform this priestly duty. Once there, Zechariah was met by an angel who shared that he and his wife would become parents.

Application: When was the last time your life took a major turn? Perhaps it was like Zechariah, and a day you *thought* would be the best, was made even better. Or perhaps, it was a normal day, that turned into one of sorrow? Before he had any reaction, the angel said to Zechariah, "do not be afraid." I think that's because we often respond to change or the unexpected with fear. How might acknowledge any fear, but lean instead on God with trust to see you through?

Prayer: Loving God, you know how often doubt and fear tug at my heart. Send your message of hope and promise to me today, reminding me to trust and not to fear. Amen.

Tuesday, December 5

Scripture: Luke 1:13-20

The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord's eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen."

Observation: Like many women (about 1 in 4), Elizabeth struggled with fertility. I imagine she shed many tears over the years, just as many hopeful parents have done since. But now, in their "old age," an angel has told them they will have a child. Zechariah responds with a question, "How can this be?" which might be a question of doubt, hope, or both. And then the angel gave Zechariah space to wonder and reflect, by removing his ability to speak.

Application: There is a lot to unpack in just a few short verses. But first: it's okay if the longings of your heart, or grief in your life, blend doubt and hope together. If you, like Elizabeth, have had a piece of yourself that always feels to be in wait. If you, like Zechariah, have been stunned into silence by news, even if good. Doubt and hope are not a contradiction – but are evidence of an active faith present in "real life" where things are not always so cut and dry. Instead of fighting against it, how might you *sit with* your doubt and hope today? Perhaps sit with them in silence, like Zechariah, and allow your doubt and hope to speak.

Prayer: God of those with doubt, God of those with hope, draw me near to you today. Speak to me through my doubts and fears, my hopes and longings. Bring to me your comfort, Amen.

Wednesday, December 6

Scripture: Luke 1:6, 21-25

They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations.

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they wondered why he was in the sanctuary for such a long time. When he came out, he was unable to speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he gestured to them and couldn't speak. When he completed the days of his priestly service, he returned home. Afterward, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant. She kept to herself for five months, saying, "This is the Lord's doing. He has shown his favor to me by removing my disgrace among other people."

Observation: In the ancient world, it was accepted thought that the hard things in life were a result of one's worthiness or behavior – a punishment for sin. Luke stresses to us that Elizabeth and Zechariah were "righteous before God" (v6). That is, none of this is a punishment. And while today we understand that bad things in life are not punishment, nor good things in life a reward based on something we do (or not do), we can continue to struggle with a sense of worthiness. Hear these words for you: You, beloved of God, are righteous before God.

Application: Elizabeth and Zechariah were ordinary people who loved and followed God. Through hard times and good, God was faithfully present to them just as God is present to you. Elizabeth said, "this is the Lord's doing," (v21) recognizing that God was present in times of struggle and times of joy. Where do you see God at work in your life today?

Prayer: Lord God, you worked out your plan through ordinary people like Zechariah and Elizabeth. That gives "ordinary me" hope. I hold myself ready for whatever you have in mind for me. Amen.

Thursday, December 7

Scripture: Genesis 21:1-7

The LORD was attentive to Sarah just as he had said, and the LORD carried out just what he had promised her. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son for Abraham when he was old, at the very time God had told him. Abraham named his son—the one Sarah bore him—Isaac. Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old just as God had commanded him. Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born. Sarah said, "God has given me laughter. Everyone who hears about it will laugh with me." She said, "Who could have told Abraham that Sarah would nurse sons? But now I've given birth to a son when he was old!"

Observation: Just like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Sarah and Abraham became parents late in life. Sarah laughed at God's promise that she'd have a son. Yet, when her child was born, she named him for the laughter God gave, calling him Isaac (in Hebrew means "laughter"). Her story reminds me of Psalm 30:5: "*Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.*"

Application: Sarah laughed initially, I suspect, in a way that said, "oh, sure!" and expressed her shock and disbelief. And yet, God was faithfully present to her, turning her disbelief into a true joyous laughter. Has God ever surprised you by how you have found comfort and hope?

Prayer: God of Hope, as we await and prepare for the presence of your Son among us once again, bring comfort to my weeping, and make a way for joy in the morning. Keep my eyes open and heart soft, that I am open to the ways you are at work in my life. Amen.

Friday, December 8

Scripture: Genesis 17:1-8

When Abram was 99 years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai. Walk with me and be trustworthy. I will make a covenant between us and I will give you many, many descendants." Abram fell on his face, and God said to him, "But me, my covenant is with you; you will be the ancestor of many nations. And because I have made you the ancestor of many nations, your name will no longer be Abram but Abraham. I will make you very fertile. I will produce nations from you, and kings will come from you. I will set up my covenant with you and your descendants after you in every generation as an enduring covenant. I will be your God and your descendants' God after you. I will give you and your descendants the land in which you are immigrants, the whole land of Canaan, as an enduring possession. And I will be their God."

Observation: We've backed up four chapters from yesterday, to remind ourselves of the promise God made to Abraham to make him a "great nation." In the time between, 25 years have passed! Not all of them included Abraham waiting patiently, but through it all, God was faithful.

Application: Are there dreams for your life, or divine promises you are waiting for? Does it feel as if 25 years have passed without response? I wonder how we might look to Abraham & Sarah, Zechariah & Elizabeth for encouragement for these times?

Prayer: God of hope, thank you for ancestors of faith who remind me that I am not alone in times of longing, waiting, and hoping. Help me trust that just as you have been faithful to them, you are faithful to me. Amen.

Saturday, December 9

Scripture: Luke 1:39-45

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

Observation: We'll close our week as we began: in the presence of Elizabeth. In this passage (one of my most favorites), Elizabeth greets a young Mary, who is just at the beginning of her own journey of surprise and hope. Elizabeth's voice rings with confidence and joy and she becomes the first person to call Jesus "Lord" -- even before he is born! In doing so, she brings much needed comfort and companionship to Mary.

Application: In these weeks ahead of our celebration of Jesus birth: where do you see, sing, and proclaim Jesus *your* Lord? How has Jesus changed your life?

Prayer: O God, keep reminding me that you kept your promises to Elizabeth, just as you keep promises today. Give me opportunities to share your joy and love with others as Elizabeth gave to Mary. Amen.