

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 17: 15-17
SECOND LESSON: Luke 1: 5-25
December 1, 2024
FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT COMMUNION

“Answered Prayer”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A mother rushed from work and headed to the drug store to get some medicine for her daughter. She noticed it was beginning to rain but thought she would just “run in and out” to get the medicine. Of course, she was in a hurry and not thinking, and when she got back to the car, she realized she had locked her keys inside. (She didn’t have one of those newer cars that makes a racket when the keys are still inside.) So, she ran into the drug store to get help from the employees, but none of them seemed to know what to do. Finally, one of them gave her a wire clothes hanger from the back room and said, “Good luck!”

The mother ran back to her car, frantically trying to get the door open. Out of desperation, she cried out “Lord, I need your help and I need it right now!” Suddenly, an old pickup pulled up right next to her. She looked and saw a man approaching her. He looked pretty rough and was covered in scars and tattoos. Without thinking she said, “Sir, could you possibly help me. My daughter is sick at home, and I have to get this medicine to her as soon as possible and I have locked my keys in the car!”

It didn’t take the man more than a minute and he had her car unlocked. She joyfully gave him a hug and said, “Thank you so much! You’re such a nice man!”

But the man said, “No, ma’am, I am not! I just got out of prison for stealing cars.”

Without any hesitation, the woman looked up to heaven and said, “Thank you God, for sending me a professional!!!”

Answered prayer is a mysterious thing.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were getting on in years and had no children. Being childless was considered a great misfortune, and of course it was always blamed on the woman. Some rabbis even went so far as to recommend divorcing the “barren” wife and marrying another in order to have children! But Zechariah was an honorable man who loved his wife. He did not do this. By the time we meet them in this story they had probably long given up the hope of having children.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were from the priestly caste living in the hill country around Jerusalem, and because of that he was eligible to serve in the Temple by lot. Many went their whole lives without being chosen. It was an incredible honor, and the most honored task of all was the burning of the

incense that symbolized the prayers of the people rising to God. No one was allowed to perform this more than once in their lifetime. This would have been the most important day in Zechariah's life, and it was about to become more so.

As Zechariah stood at the right side of the altar of incense an angel of the Lord appeared to him. Zechariah was startled, and afraid. But the angel told him not to be afraid, and that his prayer had been heard. At this point Zechariah might be excused if he had said, "*What prayer?*" They had been childless for years. The angel told him that he and Elizabeth would have a child, and went on to describe this special child and give instructions for raising him, saying:

- He will be a joy and delight to you.
- Many will rejoice because of his birth.
- 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 before he is born.
- He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.
- And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

This was absolutely astounding! We would expect Zechariah, like Abraham before him, to fall flat on his face. But even Abraham didn't have the nerve to do what Zechariah did. Zechariah **questioned** an angel! In the holy of holies, Zechariah said, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

We don't know anything about how angels think, but apparently Gabriel was not amused. Zechariah was told "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

The custom of the time was that the priest would not stay too long in the holy place lest the people fear something terrible had happened. And Zechariah was in there much longer than anticipated—long enough for people to get nervous. When he emerged he was mute. The people realized that he had seen a vision in the Temple because he kept making signs to them. And true to Gabriel's words, Zechariah remained unable to speak until John was born.

Among the many things we can take from this story two stand out. The first is that God answers prayer. It may not be in the way we expect and it will very likely will not be in the time frame we expect, but God hears and remembers, even when we forget.

The second is that no amount of proof will ever be enough for us. We are just impossible. We SAY we would believe something if an angel came and told us in person, but judging by Zechariah's response, *maybe not!*

Unanswered prayer has always been a challenge to our faith, and even answered prayer does not usually come in the form we expect. But when we say "unanswered prayer" what we mean is that we didn't get what we asked for. If my children ask me for something and they don't get it, it's not that their

request is unanswered, it's that the answer is either no, or not yet. But we are an impatient species, and more impatient by the day. Dealing with delayed gratification is not our strong point. God, however, operates on an entirely different time schedule. God exists OUTSIDE of time.

Like children, we may ask for something that is not good for us—or would be not good for someone else. God cares for all of creation and looks at the needs of all. And the timing is always more complicated than we are willing to recognize. Just think for a minute about how complicated it is to get thanksgiving dinner on the table with everything hot and ready at the same time. It's an exercise requiring mathematical skills to balance cooking times and stove size. Even getting everyone seated at the same time can be a challenge. At our house it was always like herding cats! If even Thanksgiving dinner is complicated, why do we imagine our prayer requests would be simple to answer? Our world is interconnected in incredibly complex ways.

And when God does answer our prayers in the affirmative, it is not always easy to see. It may not look like what we had in mind or come in our time schedule. But God knows every part of our lives and the potential outcomes of our prayers. And God loves the world. Sometimes we pray for healing and when healing does not come, we become bitter. But the healing in God's arms in heaven is far beyond anything that can come on earth, even if this is a hard answer to accept. Struggling in prayer is a very human condition, a condition that Jesus himself shared with us. All of us have had times when it feels that we have prayed and prayed to no avail. King David wrote in Psalm 13:

- ¹ How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
- ² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?
- ³ Look on me and answer, Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
- ⁴ and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.
- ⁵ But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
- ⁶ I will sing the Lord's praise,
for he has been good to me.

God answered Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayer. God had a plan for the child they would bring into the world, a plan much vaster than any they had. We don't know how we fit into God's larger plan, but we can trust in God's unfailing love, that we do. Amen.

Genesis 17: 15-17

¹⁵ God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."¹⁷ Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to

himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?”

Luke 1: 5-25

⁵ 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. ⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. ⁸ Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ 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 call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ 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 before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” ¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” ¹⁹ The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.” ²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. ²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”