

## *Angels Among Us*

### ***“Make Ready a People - #morehope”***

[Luke 1:5-25, 57-66](#)

We have just heard part of the narrative surrounding Jesus’ birth as recorded in the gospel according to Luke. It is the story of the birth of John the Baptist, who was Jesus’ cousin. The very first Christmas story happened during a very dark time in the life of Israel and also in the life of an elderly couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth.

It was a dark time for Israel because it had been roughly 400 years since God had spoken to the Israelites through their last prophet Malachi. Of course, people of Israel were never abandoned by God, but they surely must have felt like they had been. For several hundred years, they were occupied and governed by foreign rulers. While the foreign rulers changed from one empire to another, the sufferings of the Israelites increased, and so did their hopes for the Messiah.

Unwaveringly, they believed and hoped that God would send to them a Messiah who would free them from their political bondage and restore their national glory. Yet, despite their strong belief and hope, God remained silent. There was no judge, no prophet, and no king God raised up for them, and their hopes turned into centuries of waiting.

It was a dark time for Zechariah and Elizabeth, too. Both of them came from priestly families. Through Abijah, Zechariah belonged to a family line that traced its ancestry back to Aaron, Moses’ brother and the first high priest of Israel. Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. In fact, her name is very similar to the name of Aaron’s wife, Elisheba (Exodus 6:3).

Born into priestly family lines, Zechariah and Elizabeth could claim a noble past, yet they had no hope for a future because they were childless.

In the ancient near east culture, having children, especially sons, was viewed as a sign of God’s favor and blessing. Starting with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Old Testament characters had many children. So, for a married couple, not having a child or not being able to have a child was viewed as a disgrace and shame. And, when it happened, it was always the woman’s fault. You were not a good wife if you failed to bear a child for your husband. So, Elizabeth was known as the one who brought this disgrace onto Zechariah. People would have thought of her barrenness as a curse from God.

I am sure, like any other young married couples of their time, Elizabeth and Zechariah had once lived with great hope of having children. But, their hope slowly faded away with continuing disappointment as years went without a pregnancy. And, eventually, when they realized that Elizabeth was now too old to bear a child, their hope was gone.

Can you imagine their broken hearts and the questions running through their minds? Even though they were looked upon with shame in the world’s eyes, they had been faithful in every way, bearing their

disappointment all these years. They had been good and just in God's sight. They had lived according to God's ways. They were blameless, keeping all of God's laws and regulations with integrity. Surely, with their devotion and obedience to God, they had been good role models of faith to other people.

However, God still had not blessed them in the way that any faithful Jew would have expected them to be blessed. Their prayers to God for a child remained unanswered, as if God had forgotten them. His name Zechariah, which means "whom God remembers," must have seemed like a cruel joke. I am sure that the community, and even Zechariah and Elizabeth themselves, wondered if they had done something wrong because God did not bless them with a child despite all their efforts to live righteously.

Despite this painful and sad situation, Zechariah remained faithful, doing the work he was called to do. It was in the midst of carrying out his duties as a priest that an angel appeared to him. Zechariah was chosen to offer incense on behalf of the people in the most holy place of the temple. He was praying for others, and yet when the angel appeared to him, he said, "*Your* prayers have been heard, your wife Elizabeth is going to have a son, and you will name him John."

Actually, it's interesting that the angel would say to Zechariah that your prayers have been answered because he most certainly would not have been praying for a child when the angel appeared. Fact is, he probably had stopped praying and hoping for a child a long time ago when Elizabeth began her menopause. We hear the shock in his response to the angel's message, "I am an old man, and my wife is far past the normal age for women to bear a child. This is hard to believe!"

Do you see what happened here? Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayers, which seemed to have been forgotten, were finally answered in the middle of his offering up prayers for his people. It was while he was in the service of others that he and his wife were blessed!

Being blessed in the middle of serving others was what happened to Ryan Holets, a police officer in Albuquerque, New Mexico this fall. One day, while on duty, he saw a homeless couple using drugs. The woman was 8 months pregnant and still an addict. As he scolded her for doing drugs while pregnant, she broke down in tears. In the course of their conversation, the woman emotionally told Ryan that she had desperately hoped someone would adopt her baby. At that moment, he suddenly heard a voice in his heart, "This is your chance to help and truly make a difference."

Ryan talked to his wife, Rebecca about potentially adopting this woman's child, and she was completely onboard with his idea. Actually, they already had 4 children of their own and had already discussed adopting a child in the future. On October 12th, the mother gave birth to a baby girl, and her new mother named her Hope. Because of her birth mother's drug addiction, Hope had to endure a painful process of detoxing and withdrawals, and even had to undergo methadone treatment. Ryan and Rebecca know their new baby will likely face more health complications in the future. They are fully aware of the developmental issues she will have. Yet, Ryan said, "Whatever struggle she has, we will be there and we will work through it. And, that makes me happy."

Why is God silent for so long when God's people cry out in agony? Why are the innocent subjected to years of shame and disgrace? Why do bad things happen to good people? How long, O Lord? These are the

questions that the Israelites asked for over 400 years. These are the questions Elizabeth and Zechariah asked. And these are the questions that we ask of God today.

Though the first Christmas story of Elizabeth and Zechariah does not give us an answer to these perennial questions, we notice in the story a miracle that comes to a couple who remained faithful. Their hope for a child may have been shattered by the reality of their lives; but, in the midst of hopelessness and sadness, they still did not abandon their faith. They kept serving others with devotion. They kept going.

In doing so, they were visited by a messenger of God. Zechariah was indeed one whom God remembered. They discovered that their prayers were answered but in a time and manner that was according to God's plans and not their own. Their mourning was turned into joy, and their sorrow turned into gladness. In what appeared to the eyes of the world a hopeless situation, our God of transformation restored hope. As the messenger proclaims later in the narrative, "Nothing is impossible with God."

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth gives us hope while we wait. We live in a world where each day seems to bring new fears and anxieties. We hear troubling news regarding our national policies, which continue to favor corporations and wealthy individuals at the expense of the working-class and the vulnerable. In uncertain times like these, it is easy to fall into despair, to succumb to hopelessness.

Through Zechariah and Elizabeth, we are reminded that God still remembers us -- and that God is at work in our lives producing fruit, even in what appears to our eyes as a season of barrenness. May our waiting be marked by the steadfastness and faithfulness that they exhibited to the LORD. May we continue to do the work that God has chosen us to do, serving those around us, loving our neighbors as ourselves. For it is in the midst of our acts of faithfulness that we receive divine messages from God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

