

**Title:** Waiting for Christmas: On the waiting list

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**Preaching:** Senior Minister Randy Spleth

**Scripture:** [Luke 1:5-25](#)

**Text:** [Luke 1:57-79](#)

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We are waiting for Christmas. It is our Advent theme. Last week, we asked the question, "What are we waiting for?" That question kicked off the series and it is always a good question as you begin your march to Christmas. The answer was hope. Waiting for Christmas is about waiting for hope to be fulfilled. God's people waited 2,500

years for the Messiah, waited for God to act. If scripture tells us anything, it is this. God is never early, never late; God is always right on time. We affirmed this last week even if we affirmed that we are waiting for something greater than God sending Jesus to Bethlehem at the right time. There is another right time, a time when God will send Jesus again: this time for you and for me. There will be room, not in the inn but in His home. That is the hope for which we are waiting. This week our theme is "on the waiting list."

When was the last time you were on a waiting list? Maybe it was last night as you waited for a table at a restaurant. Maybe you are on a waiting list for Colts season tickets. Their season isn't yet complete and already there is a waiting list for 2017. If you were hoping for a Tesla Model 3 for Christmas, I hate to disappoint you. There is a waiting list. You might get one by 2019. There are more serious waiting lists. Two in our congregation are on a waiting list for an organ transplant. They will tell you what you already know. Being on a waiting list always takes longer than you imagine it will take. Sometimes, the wait is so long that you wonder if you have been forgotten.

Certainly, this is the case of our story today about two minor yet important characters of Christmas, Zechariah and Elizabeth. Both were on a waiting list for their entire life. Zechariah was on two. He waited a lifetime to win the lottery. That might be a familiar place for those of you who buy a ticket every week, dreaming of all the things you will do with your big win. But Like Zechariah, your numbers don't get picked.

Luke tells us that "Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth." (Luke 1:5b) They were really good people, the best of the best because they were described as "...righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord." Out of the 18,000 priests that took care of the Temple in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, they were the cream of the crop.

Eighteen thousand priests are a lot of preachers. I'm not sure I'd like to be around that many preachers. But they weren't all at the Temple in Jerusalem at the same time. With that many priests, there was a rotation. They served one week twice a year. The rest of the time, they lived elsewhere. Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in the hill country of Judea, 9 miles to the west of the Jerusalem.

They'd been serving the Temple for many years because Luke says that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were "getting on in years." It is a nice way of saying they were old, at least sixty and maybe much older, possibly in their 80's like Simeon and Anna. They had no children: a mark of great disgrace in that time.

Have you ever known a couple who you just thought were the best people, the most generous and gracious around, who deserve better than what they get? It's not that their life is hard but it isn't blessed. They don't get the recognition they deserve. They don't seem to get the breaks they should. You just wish something good would happen to them.

I'm sure the fellow priests of the temple in Jerusalem and their family and friends in the hill country of Judea thought this about Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were too good, too righteous and blameless, not to have been blessed with a child. In those days, people wondered if there was a reason that God hadn't given them the gift of a child.

Late in the fall, Zechariah and Elizabeth traveled to Jerusalem for the second weekly rotation of service for the year. At the end of the week, after spending the week doing all sorts of tasks to keep the Temple running, one priest was chosen to carry the incense in the Holy of Holies. This was a once in a lifetime privilege and each week, if your name was on the waiting list, you had a 1 in 350 chance of being selected. It's not lottery odds but still, it was a long-shot. Think of how many times his name wasn't drawn. Thirty, forty, maybe even fifty years, decades coming to the Temple in Jerusalem twice a year, and every time his name wasn't called. Finally, when "...his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense." (Luke 1:8b-9)

How do you think he responded? Did he jump up and down, shouting, "Whoopee! Yes. Finally. It's about time. I never thought I'd get off of this waiting list." Probably not, but I'm sure that it was exactly what was racing through his mind. But he had absolutely no idea that what he was about to experience would so change him or that his life would be radically different. And he had no idea that God was about to address multiple waiting lists and change the world. Everything was going to be different when he came out of the inner sanctuary.

It started pretty normally. The people gathered outside to pray, while Zechariah entered the sanctuary alone to offer incense. Maybe he had written instructions or maybe priests who were previously chosen told him what to expect, what to look for and where to offer the prayer. He must have gone in with such incredible excitement but clearly was shocked when "...there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. (Luke 1:11-12) Now what do you think went through his mind? Do you think, "Wow, this can't be happening? I just got off another waiting list. I've been waiting to see an angel." No. This isn't George Bailey talking to Clarence, his guardian angel. This is the last thing he expected to happen when he entered the inner sanctuary. He was terrified. The angel knew it and says so: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth..." (Luke 1:13-14) This was probably enough to cause Zechariah to shake his head. Pregnancy at their age. Can you see Elizabeth at 60, 70, maybe even 80 years old, coming out of the bathroom holding up a little stick and saying, "Look at this, Zech. We're pregnant! We are off the waiting list!"

But before he can respond the angel continues. Your boy is not just going to knock your socks off. He is going to turn all sorts of heads. He will be "...great in the sight of the Lord... turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God with the spirit and power of Elijah..." and he is the guy that is going "...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:15c-16,17c) Your boy is going to be a big league prophet like Elijah, pointing the way to the Messiah.

This isn't just about Zechariah and Elizabeth personal waiting list. This is Israel's waiting list. It is this incredible example of where God is at work both personally and corporately at the same time, answering the prayers of Zechariah for a child and at the same time, answering a prayers for the redemption of Israel. God is killing two waiting lists at the same time and Zechariah found it beyond his comprehension and says so. "Zechariah said

to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years."" (Luke 1:18).

Do you blame him? I don't. I know this story personally. Some of you know that our two children are adopted. We were on waiting lists. It took a couple of years for us to adopt our son, Andrew. But it took almost 5 years to adopt our daughter Claire. We were a month from giving up when we got the phone call. Ann took it. I was out on the deck trying to fire up the BBQ. She came out to tell me we'd gotten a phone call from the attorney about a baby. I didn't believe her. I couldn't believe it was happening. Ann had to force me to get on the phone and hear that our daughter had been born. I just didn't believe that our waiting list was ever going to end.

Sometimes you can wait so long that you lose the capacity to believe. This is where Zechariah was and it wasn't just about his son. It was also about the redemption of Israel. It was as if he was hitting the lottery three times: first to enter the inner sanctuary, secondly to have a child, and finally to find out his son was going to point the way to the Prince of Peace.

"How can this be? I need a sign." Gabriel says, "Dude, I am the sign. I'm an angel. What more do you want. I hang out with God. God sent me with the message. And now, because you didn't believe, you are going to have to think about this a little longer. "... you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." And at the very moment, Gabriel took away Zechariah voice. While all of this was going on, "...the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak." (Luke 1: 20-22)

Imagine the buzz that went through Jerusalem. Something happened to old Zechariah when he was in the Holy of Holies. But then, think about the tabloid story that hit the Jerusalem People's Magazine word once word got out that old lady Elizabeth is pregnant is 5 months pregnant and Zechariah still wasn't talking. That's how long it took for them to show their faces once they went home and Zechariah somehow convinced Elizabeth, without talking, that there was a way to get off the waiting list and tonight was the night.

Luke doesn't tell us anything about the pregnancy and he doesn't tell us about the birth. Elizabeth gives birth and the neighborhood and friends have incredible joy. Then, as was the custom, on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, there is a ceremony of circumcision and at the same time, there is a naming of the child. Zechariah still can't talk. "Have you ever seen a minister who cannot talk

for nine months? You probably wish you had! A man so dumbfounded by the news that he'll be a father that he is unable to participate in the predictable family feud about the naming of the child. Elizabeth says, "His name will be John" and the response is immediately bad. "Nobody in our family is named John...of course you're going to name him Zechariah...we'll call him Junior." Zechariah stands there facing this Godly mess of unexpected birth so unable to speak that he has to write it down on a wax tablet: "His name will be John."<sup>1</sup> It's a hilarious scene.

At that very moment, Zechariah finds his voice. What would you say if God forced you to be silent for nine months? I can't imagine being silent for that long and if I was, I can't imagine that the first thing out of my mouth would be to praise God. But that is exactly what Zechariah does. Nine months of being quiet, nine months of listening, nine months of paying attention to how God was taking his and Israel's waiting list and laying them aside, that God's plan was coming to fruition in his lifetime and the miracle of his son would be part of the coming Messiah, nine months of quietly considering that and all that could come out of his mouth was a song of praise and thanksgiving.

He begins, overcome with thanksgiving. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them." (Luke 1:68)

He celebrates God's plan. "...the mercy promised to our ancestors... his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies might serve him..." (Luke 1:72-74a)

He take a personal moment to point and say, "That's my boy." My son, my 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 by the forgiveness of their sins." (Luke 1:76-77) And finally, ends with the truth about why all those years on the waiting list was worth it. "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:78-79)

It is a wonderful story, one of the best in scripture. It has all the necessary ingredients, drama, mystery, humor, scandal, and in the end, incredible, joyful celebration when the time of waiting is over and a child is born, a son given.

Maybe that is the way with all waiting lists, at least the waiting list that is important to you and me: the one with your names on it. While the list is

active, there is the drama of your life and the mystery of God's presence with you. You wonder about what is really going on and when God is going to act. There are humorous moments when you look silly in the way you respond to truth and others when you are scandalous in the way you act. We have all of this in our lives. Zechariah's story is in a way, our story, your story and my story, a story about our time on the waiting the list. Which means eventually, when you hit the lottery, and you will, when your name is called, and it will be called, the way the story line goes, a child will be born, a son given.

Don't call him John. "...he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

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<sup>1</sup> Norfleet, Agnes W. 2010. "Peripheral angels." *Journal For Preachers* 34, no. 1: 13-15. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1