

A promise of the Messiah is given to the people of God, at a time of darkness and suffering
While they hope and wait, things get worse
They are sent into exile and after about 70 years, are finally allowed to return home
Yet, they wait for the promise of the Messiah
400 years pass... children are born and the story retold
When will the Messiah come?

Waiting is hard—we yearn for the completion
Ultimately waiting teaches us that we are called to the journey and the invitation to be faithful
That it is more about being faithful on the journey than it is about the answer
The human struggle is to stay present during the long wait
To find God in the midst of waiting
Yet we wait—and waiting is hard

As we turn the page into the New Testament, we continue to find people waiting...
They are going about their daily lives
Religious traditions are maintained

It is here that we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth—in Luke 1:5
Zechariah is a priest in the priestly order of Abijah
Elizabeth is a descendent of the Aaron, brother of Moses and the first high priest of the Israelites
“Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.” Luke 1:6
They had no children and they were getting old
They knew the story of Abraham and Sarah
—but I dare say they never dreamed it would happen to them
To be childless in that culture brought both sorrow and shame

There were 24 groups of priests and each group served one week, twice a year
There were so many priests,
that an individual priest only offered incense at the daily sacrifice once in a lifetime
This day, it was Zechariah’s turn
It was the climax of Zechariah’s priestly duties
God broke into an ancient Jewish ritual with a profound intervention—God came to Zechariah
Outside, the people are waiting and praying
This is the Jewish form of gathered worship—much as we are gathered in worship today
“the whole assembly of the people was praying outside”
Much as we do—gathered worship is both about the community worshipping and personal prayer

While Zechariah is in the holy place—an angel appears, which terrifies Zechariah
The first words of the angel are, “Fear Not!”—then he proceeds with his message
As we have learned, this is a primary message, that we can trust God’s intervention in our lives
Then the angel promises the impossible—that Zechariah and Elizabeth, though barren, will have a son
They are to name him John, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit and he has special work to do...
He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Luke 1:16-17 NRSV

This is the work of the Old Testament prophets—to call the people back to God—to repent
In the tradition of Isaiah, he will prepare the way of the Lord

This is all beyond Zechariah's comprehension

He is old and his wife is beyond the age of bearing children—it is physically impossible!
Yet, the angel Gabriel, identifies himself and that he was sent by God to bring this good news
But, since you didn't believe, you will become mute until the promise is fulfilled
The story tells us that the people wondered what was taking him so long
I can imagine Zechariah standing in the holy place, stunned after the angel left him
Replaying the words in his mind
Wondering at the truth of it all—the impossibility
Trying out his voice and discovering he cannot speak
How will he tell the people? His wife?
What does it all mean?

Finally, he leaves the holy place and goes out to the people
When he can't speak, the people recognize that he has seen a vision
It doesn't appear that the people are given more information at this point
The people join the wondering and waiting

Zechariah returns home to Elizabeth and she becomes pregnant
The waiting returns and brings with it more questions than answers
What they know is that Zechariah cannot speak and Elizabeth is pregnant
Zechariah must have wondered at the words of the angel time and time again
Like Elijah, he will call people to repent and prepare people for the Lord
What is coming? What is next?

And so they wait—with the assurance of a pregnancy that change is happening
With only the words of an angel about what that means
While the pregnancy is only 9 months—it is a baby that's born, not an adult
It will be many years before they know what is meant by the angel's words
And so they wait...

But they wait with a promise—a promise that has come in the darkness
Elizabeth responds to the promise with gratitude for the immediate removal of shame
*"This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away
the disgrace I have endured among my people." Luke 1:25 NRSV*
Whatever the future holds, this much she knows—she is no longer a disgrace among her people

We also wait—we wait with the promise that God is with us
While we wait, we are aware of the darkness around us
Yet, we have chosen to live unafraid and trust God on this journey
To enter with God into the unfolding story
Holding the Light, not knowing the next steps, yet choosing to be faithful to the journey
We stay together, finding strength in community as we wait
Like Elizabeth, we see imminent change as we anticipate a move, yet we wait for it to unfold
We express our gratitude for that which is happening as we wait
Yet, we wait, aware that God is at work in our world and we are faithful to its unfolding among us