

First Christmas Stories
1st Sunday of Advent: Elizabeth

⁵ When Herod was king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah. He was a member of the priestly order of Abijah, and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. ⁶ Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. ⁷ They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old.

⁸ One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. ⁹ As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying. ¹¹ While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. ¹² Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. ¹³ But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. ¹⁴ You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth.^[b] ¹⁶ And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children,^[c] and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly."...²⁴ Soon afterward his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months. ²⁵ "How kind the Lord is!" she exclaimed. "He has taken away my disgrace of having no children." Luke 1:5-17 & 24-25

³⁹ A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town ⁴⁰ where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Luke 1:39-41

(Skit Guys Video)

When it comes to what we preach and teach around here **Jesus is always the subject**. If it is a story from the **Old Testament** then Jesus is still the subject. If we are talking about a **topic, like unity last week**, within that topic Jesus is the subject. When we are looking at key scriptures from the book of **Ephesians in January** written by Paul, Jesus is still the subject. At Christmas time, or what we call Advent, these four Sundays before Christmas day, **it is more obvious that Jesus is the subject of what we are preaching and teaching**.

That being said, we are **going to get different people's telling of that story where Jesus is the subject**. It is the Christmas story according to _____ each week. These people come from **different points of reference**. They **experience different parts of Jesus coming to earth**. They come with **different needs** to the messiah. Their stories are all a little different, **creating a clearer picture of God coming to us**. We all come to worship and celebrate Jesus, but there will be certain people who tell the story that **we will relate to or connect with**. That's why God, in his wisdom, has **a woman who wants kids, but can't have them; a bunch of shepherds, magi who aren't even Hebrew, and a carpenter who's intended wife mysteriously becomes pregnant**.

Today it is...**The Christmas story according to Elizabeth, goes like this...**It's Jesus' story, not Elizabeth's.

When we look at Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, we can see that these are **good people, devoted people, righteous people, and yet they are suffering being childless**.

Telling the Christmas story according to Elizabeth begins with her **inability to conceive and give birth to a child**. That is the part of her story that **affects or colors every other part**. Not having a child has a **ripple effect** through her life. There are so many things that other women are experiencing that she is not. **Elizabeth's telling of the Christmas story begins with where she is. It begins...When life appears barren.**

What do you think of when you hear the word barren? I think of a desert.

The word means, "land too poor to produce much or any vegetation."

- "showing no results of achievement"
- "bleak or lifeless"
- "empty of meaning or value"

In the list, it had another definition labeled **"archaic"**. This one said, "a woman unable to have children."

That's a pretty depressing list of options for defining barren, but that's where we have to start with Elizabeth. It would be **dishonest** to tell her story without starting there, because that's how people viewed her situation.

Elizabeth heard it. She heard it for years. In a time when a **woman's worth** was measured in how many children she had, in a time when, if you had many children it was because **God was angry with you...that you were sinful...that you were being punished** for something. **Leviticus 20** even lists

the punishment of certain sins would be childlessness. **"How can they let this guy stay as a priest or maybe she wasn't a virgin when they were married."**

They have both served God faithfully even in this time of being barren. They didn't play the victim or blame God. There is no sign that they went off and hid in a cave waiting to die. There's no evidence that they had become bitter or turned their back on God, thinking that he was punishing them or that he simply didn't care. Zechariah was still serving as a priest in the temple. He had remained faithful to the God of Israel and continued to serve, helping his people worship God as He had instructed their ancestors.

In this situation, Elizabeth could have gone several different directions.

- **Hopeless, the way it is, is the way it will always be. God has deserted me.**
- **Adjust my expectation of what God is doing.** This could be a positive or a negative way of looking at her situation. **She could look to her free time** of not having kids, looking for new ways to serve. **She could look to love and support other women** in her situation.

Are you in a barren place right now? Is nothing growing? Your career, life, family, was at one point moving forward, giving a sense of hope, but now you are doing the same things that caused growth, but it's no longer working. It's as if you are watering, fertilizing like you used to, but your garden is brown. Can you relate to Elizabeth's situation? If you can, then lean into what God wants to say to you today, there's good news.

When we think of the word barren, **we think of a desert.** There's a **story in the Old Testament where Moses** is leading his people, and they are grumbling for a drink of water. They're complaining and complaining...**they're forming a maybe-we-should-turn-around-and-go-back committees.** Moses says, **"Can you give them a drink?"** and God doesn't just give them a drink, he gives them a river...**imagine Niagara Falls in reverse** shooting up from the ground. **The scriptures tell us that God gave the complainers water" abundantly."**

The prophet Isaiah, who speaks of Jesus centuries before his birth, writes these words about God and his part in the lives of people who are in a barren place.

Look, a righteous king is coming! And honest princes will rule under him.
² Each one will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm,

like streams of **water** in the desert and the **shadow** of a great rock in a parched land. ³ Then everyone who has eyes will be able to see the truth, and everyone who has ears will be able to hear it. Isaiah 32:1-3

When you are in the desert, there are three things that can help you and they are all listed in this verse. **You need shelter from the wind** when the sand is blowing in your face and getting into your eyes. **You need water to quench your thirst** and keep you hydrated because there is heat and the air is so dry that it drains you. **You also need shade from the relentlessly pounding sun** that burns your skin and creates glare making it hard to see. **Without these, the elements will wear you down to where there is no hope.**

And yet, the righteous king who is coming and those under his rule, are going to create the shelter, hydration, and shade that you need where you are right now.

The Christmas story, according to Elizabeth, goes like this...when life appears barren, **God offers abundance.**

¹⁰ **The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it (more) abundantly (full). John 10:10 ESV**

We seem to have a conflict. Reality for Elizabeth seems, at first, more barren than abundant. **What do we do when it looks barren and deserted, but yet we have these promises from God about abundance and inheritance?** Do you give up, get bitter, doubt God's goodness, or do you look for what he is doing in the desert?

And yet in the barren desert of childlessness, God allows Elizabeth to realize her greatest desire, which was to be a mother.

When does one consider abundance? When you have none? He demonstrates abundance in the midst of a barren desert.

This is what Isaiah was talking about in chapter 58. He has been chiding **the people of Israel** for their sin and disobedience, creating their own spiritual desert where God does not hear or bless their prayers, fasts and sacrifices. **He tells them if they will turn to God, he will turn their desert into a river.** The water is a symbol of God's presence and provision and fullness.

The LORD will guide you continually, giving you water when you are dry and restoring your strength. You will be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring. ¹² Some of you will **rebuild the deserted ruins of your**

cities. Then you will be known as a **rebuilder of walls and a restorer of homes.** Isaiah 58:11-12

Rebuild...build up, wall up or wall off

Restore...return or turn back. Can also mean to turn back to God or **repent.**

But where does all of this rebuilding or restoring going on? It is happening in the deserted ruins of your city. That is a place that **was full of life and growth, now it is barren and deserted.** God is talking about bringing abundance to barren places by **sending his people, who have well-watered gardens** and springs of living water!

God's promise is to give life more abundantly in barren places. And he is doing it through Elizabeth, a formerly barren, aging, woman. People talk about a **biological clock** running out, hers had fallen off the wall and was in pieces on the floor. Then she swept it up and tossed it in the trash. **But God brought abundance to his people, to all people** through a barren place that he made abundant.

He doesn't always give us the kind of abundance we want like with Elizabeth, but he does make us all rebuilders and restorers!

Can you hear the abundant joy coming from her as she praises God? **"How kind the Lord is!" she exclaimed. "He has taken away my disgrace of having no children."** Luke 1:25 Her words not mine.

Have you ever flown over the desert in California. In a sea of brown, suddenly there are these square patches of green. Those are the golf courses near Palm Springs. Look for a picture. **That's what God did for Elizabeth that created growth, life, and hope in Israel.**

Don't miss that second part, where not only does he create rivers in the desert, but he makes us into well watered gardens, flowing springs, and we are to be the ones who rebuild and restore in the barren places. We are the **water hose** that creates the lush green golf course in the middle of the Mojave Desert.

How does this apply to Elizabeth? Simple, God's abundance toward her will overflow into his abundance for all people. **Her son will be the one who will point people toward the promised messiah and King,** who will give salvation and peace to all people. **She is blessed and then God makes her into a watered garden** in the desert, a river that brings life to others! He makes Elizabeth a fountain of living water because of who is in her. **Jesus said there is none greater among men than John.**

The abundance isn't simply the baby in her, it is the effect for the kingdom that will come because of the baby. We are a part of that abundance. The desert has no chance, much like the gates of hell.

Here's a description of the baby becoming God's abundance for his people. He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly." Luke 1:17

John will be the one who will get people's attention back on God and then will point them to God in human flesh, Jesus. Then things will really start to grow in this barren desert.

Next we look at the difference between good and abundant. Here's a picture to help explain. (Deb's picture as a lead in to the next point) The Christmas story, according to Elizabeth, goes like this...when life appears barren God offers abundance then...The choice becomes my plans or His Kingdom.

My plan is how I picture my life happening. We call that **my dream**.

What is His Kingdom? That is the restoration of God's loving rule over all things.

Obviously she had plans as a young woman. We know she wanted to be a mother. That is what every young Hebrew girl wanted. This was expected and, as we said earlier, to not have children would raise suspicions from those around her.

God had a bigger plan!

So what did it take for her to be in the position to experience not just having her own child, but the abundance of God's kingdom that would come through her baby becoming the man we heard about in Luke.

Patience...Without patience she would have become bitter and driven people away from her and maybe even destroyed her marriage. I don't think it is out of the realm of possibility for Zechariah to divorce her because she didn't have any children for him. So he had to have patience. **Without patience, we compromise.**

How often in relationships, and in all parts of life, do we compromise and make terribly destructive choices when we aren't willing to keep our eyes on the prize and exercise patience.

She needed trust in God that he loves her and is good even though her plans of being a mother and having a family weren't coming to fruition.

Can you think of times in your life when you were in a barren place waiting on God's abundance and, because of a lack of trust and patience, you chose and it was a mess? That's when we start comparing our life to the life others are living, start to get jealous, and then believe that God is not good and that he is holding out on me. That is where sin begins.

Noticing what I missed...this is kingdom vision...Can we see signs of the kingdom while in the barren place? Can we see God restoring his loving rule even when we are in the barren desert? That's why we ask the question all the time, "God how can you be so good?" Then we list signs of his goodness. Those signs of his goodness are signs of the Kingdom. We want that good stuff to happen more and more here, "on earth as it is in heaven." When we do that, it is much easier to have patience and keep our eyes on God, who is good.

Persistence in believing that God is always at work bringing about his kingdom allows me to see how he is good. Elizabeth had to be persistent at this, even relentless. It's not simply looking on the bright side or turning that frown upside down. It means constantly believing that God is at work around me and I just have to look for it, even anticipate it.

The hard part isn't choosing between good or bad. The hard part is choosing between good and best. Having a baby is good. Raising him to be John the Baptist and then sharing him with the world is best. Even with the pain of having him die at the whim of a corrupt ruler.

Elizabeth could look back and see that God was at work. He had the timing right. He was teaching them through the suffering and the waiting. He was making them into the right people to raise the man who would turn the peoples heads and then point them to the messiah, the savior.

Have you ever looked back and saw how God was being good by not giving you what you wanted when you wanted it? I wish I had the faith, skills, and maturity I have now, back when my body was 25. But I can see how I would have made a mess of it because of pride. If I had been successful and growing a really big church, then I would have been too busy to think about being a part of a disciple making movement and taking risks like a coffee shop and a second campus in another town.

What would Elizabeth do?

1. Look for The Kingdom in the desert. The kingdom is the restoration of God's rule over all things.

2. Are we a people prepared for the Lord? What do you need to do to prepare for the Lord? Is there a small step of obedience that will signal to God that you are ready to receive his abundance like Elizabeth was? She proved she was ready by recognizing why her baby leapt at the sight of Mary. She wasn't so absorbed in her own good fortune that she missed that it was a part of something bigger than she could have ever imagined.

Listen! It's the voice of someone shouting, "Clear the way through the wilderness for the LORD! Make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God! Isaiah 40:3

Are we able to see and are we ready to receive his abundance in our barren wasteland? Do I want to try to control my barren situation or do I want to trust God in my barrenness like Elizabeth did. "God I want not only your abundance for me but to make me that spring of living water for others creating more abundance."