

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Dealing with Disappointment

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Scripture:

Luke 1:1-25 (selected verses)

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

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."

Transcript:

Holy Spirit, as we come to your word, we ask that you would please teach us from it so we can be more like you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, my oldest daughter, Holly, is a huge Taylor Swift fan. And a couple of weeks ago, she asked my wife and me to pray that she would get tickets to a Taylor Swift concert. And our first response was, "We raised you with better theology than that. Not going to pray for concert tickets." But then one of my wife's friends referred us to my sermon from that week, where I had talked about how Holly sometimes will call us to find how to find a place to get her oil changed rather than Google it because she wants the relationship. And so this woman quoted my own sermon back to us. I hate it when my own sermon is quoted back to me and said, "She just wants you involved in her life."

So we prayed. I prayed for her to get the tickets. I actually prayed very earnestly for her to get the tickets because when it comes to my kids, I hate to see them disappointed. I just hate to see them disappointed. So I prayed really hard. And she got the tickets to four different concerts. I know you're all like, "How did she do that? It's a miracle." So now I think that we maybe need a conversation about greed and hoarding and how she should give one of those tickets to me, but that's not going to happen. So I'm going to be the one who is disappointed.

We all face disappointments in life. Some of them very minor, like concert tickets. Some disappointments are deeply painful. A relationship you thought would last forever didn't. You don't get into the college that you'd hoped for, or the sports team that you had hoped for. You lose a job that you love. Maybe you thought you'd be married by now and you're not. Maybe

you are married and it's not turning out the way that you had hoped. The holidays can be hugely disappointing, either because of family drama or because of someone who's missing. We all face disappointments in life from time to time. So if you're not disappointed now, don't worry. You will be, maybe even in this sermon. I don't know. And you at least know someone who's disappointed. So how can you help them?

This Advent, we're going to do a sermon series called *Invited*, where we're looking at the Christmas story in the Bible and all the different kinds of people God invites into relationship with Him and to be part of His rescue mission to the world, including disappointed people. And we see that at the very first chapter of the Book of Luke, which begins the Christmas story with two very disappointed people named Zechariah and Elizabeth, who have longed to have a child but they haven't had one. And God invites them out of their disappointment into His hope and joy. And it shows us how God invites us and others out of our disappointment into His hope and joy. And it starts out and it says, "In the time of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decreed blamelessly. But... "

There is so much pain in that one word. "They were righteous, but... They'd done everything right, but... They had followed God faithfully, but... " We all have a but. This is just a biblical teaching, metaphorically speaking. But they were childless. And not only that, they were both very old and past childbearing years. So not only are they disappointed, they feel hopeless. It's never going to happen. You ever feel that way? It's just too late. It's not going to happen. I'll never get married. I'll never have the friend group I want. I'll never get a job like that.

And back then, in that culture, to be childless was considered to be a sign that God was punishing you for something terrible that you did. So for Zechariah and Elizabeth, it's not just disappointment. It's also disgrace. And often our disappointment is linked closely to some sense of shame that we have. I lost my job and I'm embarrassed to tell people that I'm unemployed. My family is a mess and I am embarrassed to tell people how messed up my family is. Back to Taylor Swift, because there's just so much we can learn from Taylor Swift. This fall, she did something nobody has ever done. Every song on the top 10 list was one of her songs from her new album, *Midnights*, which is a very smart album, by the way, super smart album. And one of those songs is called *Anti-Hero*. And it has the refrain line, "It's me. Hi. I'm the problem. It's me. At tea time, everybody agrees."

And the song is about the things she doesn't like about herself. And I find that very poignant. Here she is, one of the most successful recording artists in history, covering genres as different as country and pop and indie rock. And yet she's dealing with all kinds of shame and embarrassment. "It's me. Hi. I'm the problem. Everybody agrees." Where are you not only disappointed but maybe even embarrassed? Because the rest of this story shows how God invites us out of disappointment into His hope and joy. So let's keep reading. "Once, when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God... " And right there, that tells us a lot. To move from disappointment into God's hope and joy, God invites us to stay faithful to Him. Year after year, Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed for a child, all through

their 20s, all through their 20s, all through their early 40s. 10,950 days of praying, only to be disappointed every 28 days.

And it's not that they don't think God is good. They just maybe wonder what he's good for, certainly not anything they care about and yet. And yet, there they are, still at the temple, still praying, still serving, still giving, staying faithful to God. Now by stay faithful, I don't think that means we pretend that we're not disappointed. I actually think staying faithful to God might mean some really angry prayers to God. Why is this happening? Why aren't you helping me? Where are you, God? And to God, that's staying faithful because it means we're still in relationship with Him. And relationship with God is the only thing that ultimately, in the end, heals our disappointment. So the text goes on and it says, "One year, Zechariah was chosen by lot to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense." And this was a rare honor that would happen to a priest at most once in their life, if it ever happened at all.

And this shows us another way that God invites us out of our disappointment and that is to look for the signs that God is working in our lives. This is a big honor for Zechariah and no, it is not the miracle that they were praying for, but it is a sign that God is still in their life, blessing them, working in their lives. I don't know about you, but when I'm disappointed, it is really easy for me to overlook all the good things God is doing in my life and focus on the thing I'm disappointed about. I don't have this and so I'm not paying attention to all the other things God is doing in my life. But when we see that God is still at work, the relationships he's giving us, the opportunities to still make a difference, even if our health is declining, the good ways that God is blessing us, it helps us know that he's still with us, we're not alone. It helps us experience His presence. And ultimately that, God's presence, is the only thing that really heals our disappointment.

So if you're disappointed, look for the good things he's still doing in your life, because he's always doing something good, so that you can know you're not alone, because that's going to heal the disappointment over time. So Zechariah goes into the temple to burn incense and then all heaven breaks loose. And it says, "Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, and the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid. Zechariah.'" I just love it when these angels suddenly appear in the Bible and the first thing they say is, "Don't be afraid." Right? Easy for you to say, Angel dude. Right? You don't be afraid. "Your prayer has been heard." That's an important word. We get out of disappointment when we feel that our pain has been heard by God, by other people. One of the ways we help other people get out of their disappointment is to listen to their hurt so that they feel heard.

"Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you are to call him John," who grows up to be John the Baptist, who is a prophet that points the way to Jesus." So after all these years of disappointment, God shows up and does what they have been asking for decades, which shows another way that God helps us get out of our disappointment and that is to remember with God, it is never too late. Whatever it is you're disappointed about, it is not too late. God will still move. God will still act, maybe not quite how you expect, but it is never too late with God. It

may take decades, as it did for Zechariah and Elizabeth, but it's never too late. And as we wait, it's not wasted time. As we wait, the Holy Spirit works on us, refines our character, makes us more like Jesus, gets us ready for the blessing that God is going to give us in the future.

Now the problem is we're not very good at waiting. I'm not very good at it. It goes against our culture. We want it now. I remember one time my wife and I were driving to a friend's house and we passed a church that had this sign in the front that said, "Spiritual wholeness in three hours." And my wife said, "Why can't we have spiritual wholeness in three hours at our church?" And I said, "Because we're Presbyterian. It takes a year just to form the committee, right?" But see Christ-like character, like good wine, cannot be rushed. Some things just take time. And I have found over and over again in my life that when I have had to wait for something, sometimes for years, I've had to wait for something, God never wasted the time. He was always using it to get me ready for the thing that He was going to bless me with in the future. It's never too late.

So then the text continues, Angel dude shows up, your prayer's been heard, you're going to have a baby. And then it says, "Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.'" Didn't he say that diplomatically? "Well along in years." Last week, as you know, I was preaching at my friend Scott Scruggs' church in Kirkland, and he was preaching here, and one of their musicians is in college, and he called me a "senior veteran of life." That was not a compliment. Senior veteran you, right? Zechariah basically says that, "Angel, I don't believe you. We can't have a baby. I'm too old. She's too old. Medicare's not going to cover it. Not going to happen."

And I love the angel's response. The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. Do you know who I am? Don't mess with me. I stand in the presence of God and now you will not be able to speak until the day this happens because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time." Basically he puts Zechariah in a nine-month time-out. And what this shows is that in order to step out of disappointment, into hope and joy, God often invites us to let go of something we're hanging onto. In this case, it's Zechariah's disbelief and Zechariah's disappointment, which because as odd as it sounds, sometimes we don't want to give up even our disappointment.

And that sounds weird, but that's why some people are perpetually disappointed, never have joy. They can't let go of it. It comforts them in some way, or it gets them attention, or it's just become a habit. And stepping into something new is kind of scary, like having a baby when you're old. That's kind of scary. And even if it's what we've always wanted, sometimes we don't want to give up our disappointment if it means that we have to do something different. And for people who are like that, we need to listen to their pain, but also show them where God is working in their life so that they can step out a disappointment.

And that's basically what the angel does here with Zechariah, says, "You're not going to talk until the baby's born." And I'm not sure that's so much punishment as it is time for Zechariah to reflect and pray, because sometimes our disappointment shouts so loudly, we can't hear God's promises over all the noise. And I think the angel's saying, "Just take some time, Zechariah, I want you to pray. I want you to chill out for a minute. I want to help you let go of that disappointment so you can step into what God has for you, even if it's scary to you."

What might God be inviting you to let go of so that you can move out of disappointment? Maybe it's to let go of your comfort and do the uncomfortable thing and say to your spouse, "Let's go to counseling so this marriage can get healed." Maybe it's something you're hanging onto that's become an idol for you, your money, career, reputation, and it's holding you back from stepping into something new and different and scary that God is inviting you to do and it's going to heal your disappointment, but you're afraid to let go.

To move from disappointment to hope and joy, God invites us to stay faithful to Him. Look for the ways He's working in your life. Remember, with God, it's never too late. Let go of whatever is holding you back and then finally, expect the unexpected. Zechariah does not expect God to do anything amazing, understandably so. He has decades of evidence that God is not going to give him the thing that he's longing for. And maybe you feel that way sometimes too. I just... No, I don't believe God's going to show up and do anything amazing. I just don't believe it. But God does. After decades of disappointment, God shows up and He gives them the thing they've been praying for. I'm really aware that in my preaching, over the years, I often spend so much time talking about what happens when God doesn't do the miracle that I neglect to talk about what happens when He does, because sometimes He does.

God does amazing things. Just a few verses before this story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, just a few verses before, Luke begins his gospel, the first chapter of Luke, with these words, "Many have undertaken to drop an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the very first were eyewitnesses. I myself have carefully investigated everything and decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." See, Luke's a historian and he interviewed eyewitnesses and he's writing to a guy named Theophilus... Remember that name... To say, I've done the research. This stuff really happened. God did these amazing things because God does amazing things. Sometimes the miracle happens. Sometimes the healing happens. Sometimes the thing you've been longing for, God gives it to you.

And other times God may not give you the exact thing you asked for, but He gives you something different that gives you what you were really longing for, way deep down, maybe didn't even know it. So for instance, sometimes when we pray for a certain relationship, we think we want that relationship, but deep down what we really want is intimacy and connection. And if we can find that in God and it satisfies in a way no relationship can, then God answered our prayer, not quite the way we expected, but answered what we were deep down really

praying for, not what we asked, but deep down was what we asked. Or maybe you pray for a certain job, but what you're really longing for isn't just that job, it's a feeling of meaning and purpose, and maybe God leads you to something different, but that gives you that sense of meaning and purpose in a bigger way.

He answered the prayer underneath the prayer, the thing not quite what you asked for, but deeper down, it is what you ask for. And even those prayers where we can't imagine why God wouldn't want to answer them, like for someone to be healed of a life threatening disease, so often, God in those moments gives us supernatural courage and hope. And that meets our deepest longing to know that we are not alone in the universe, that one day God will wipe away every tear, and that in the meantime, He will use every tragedy for good. And I have told you countless stories of how God has done that for people in this church. God invites us out of disappointment and into His hope and joy.

So, action steps for this week. First, ask God to show you the step He wants you to take to help you get out of disappointment, whatever, maybe something in this sermon, maybe it's something else. Ask Him to show you and then take that step. And then second, invite someone else out of their disappointment, because you know people who are disappointed and discouraged. Life has not been kind. Dreams have not been fulfilled, and they need to be invited into Jesus' hope and courage and joy. And you are the one that's going to invite them. You're the one that's going to be the invitation, by how you listen to them to help them feel heard, by how you help them see God at work in their life. You could ask them to join you here in worship at Christmas time. People are more willing to join you here in one of our worship services, or maybe worship through music on December 11th, or maybe Christmas Eve.

And don't just invite them to church, but be in relationship with them. Keep having conversations with them. And actually this is going to be an action step, one of our action steps, for the next couple of weeks. And we're going to measure the success of this not by how many people come to our church in December, but by how many new people we have in January, people who have come back because of how you've walked in their life. Because thousands of people, there are thousands of people who need to be invited out of their disappointment into the hope and joy that only Jesus can give, and you are their invitation.

A woman in our church told me a story about how she was visiting her mother-in-law with her husband in the Midwest. And she and her mother-in-law had never really gotten along. They had a lot of tension, a lot of fighting, and that kind of family tension is very disappointing. And while they were visiting the mother-in-law, this woman was praying about it, and she got a picture in her mind of the word stay in capital letters. And her mother-in-law was ill but was going to live for another couple of months at least. So they were planning on coming back here and then going back again. But this woman knew that that picture of the word stay was from God. And so she stayed and she said, "I saw God at work all over the place." She said one time she

asked God, "How long do I have to stay for?" And she heard God say, "For the right amount of time," which how frustrating is that, right? That's not very specific, God.

And another time, she was asleep and dreaming, and in her dream, she heard God say, "Wake up." She woke up hours earlier than she normally wakes up. Turns out her mother-in-law had fallen and needed help. She said throughout she had these great conversations with her mother-in-law, even as she was dying. They were really super healing of the relationship. And she said it was so holy. She said, 'The closer my mother-in-law got to death, the thinner the veil became between heaven and earth, until finally she was talking to people on the other side of the grave.' After decades of family tension and all the disappointment of that, years of praying about that, years which God did not waste, used those years in this woman's life to grow her character, shape her, get her ready for this healing and this moment, God showed up and answered her prayer, not the way she imagined, by staying there for months and months and months with her mother-in-law, but God did amazing things and brought healing.

And if He can do that for her, then what can He do for you? And the disappointments you face, because we all face disappointments. There are four names in this first Christmas story, in the book of Luke. And the names are significant. Zechariah means the Lord remembers. Elizabeth means God keeps His promises. John means the Lord is gracious and Theophilus means lover of God. And together they tell a story. What disappointments do you face? And who do you know that is disappointed and needs to hear some good news? The Lord remembers you. The Lord keeps His promises. The Lord is gracious. And when we experience that, we become lovers of God. So Jesus, thank you, that you invite us out of disappointment. We ask that you would show us the steps you want us to take this week to move from disappointment closer to your hope and your joy. Show us those steps, God, and then show us who you would want us to invite out of their disappointment and into a closer relationship with you. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- How has God invited you out of disappointment in the past or currently?
- Who could you invite to church this Christmas season, perhaps someone who is dealing with disappointment and discouragement?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.