

South Bay Community Church
Sermon Reflections
Expect the Unexpected: It's Not Over Until
26 & 27 November 2022
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Scripture Text: Luke 1:5-25

Sermon Preamble

As followers of Jesus, we never want to forget the reason for the season. The season we call Advent, literally means coming. We are reliving, anticipating, and celebrating Jesus' first coming. His first coming was a big surprise. The prophet Isaiah foretold Jesus' coming. It was prophesied 600 years before and fulfilled when Jesus actually came. When Jesus did come, it was a glorious, expected, yet also an unexpected surprise. God loves to surprise us. We think it's over, done, never going to happen; then a door we never saw coming opens wide, and God says, okay it's go time. Surprise! The Advent account, the coming of Jesus and just about everything surrounding his birth was expected through prophecy, but unexpected in reality. Surprise! Over the next few messages, as we wait and prepare for the coming of Jesus, we are going to relive the story. We will experience the truth afresh that we serve God who loves to surprise us. There are God surprises every day; many go right over our heads. Let us give God a praise offering for God's wonderful, unexpected surprises!

Hear the Word of the Lord from Luke 1:5-25

In this message, we are going to join Zechariah and Elizabeth. They experienced the unexpected and were surprised by God. Let us fully enter into this story. Is there anything we have not noticed before? Maybe we will hear a surprise.

For context of Luke 1:5-25, we need to reach back to last verses of the Old Testament

As we unpack this scripture and begin the story of Jesus' birth, we have to look at prior scripture, about 400 years to the last verses in the Old Testament. "Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord arrives. His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse." (Malachi 4:5-6). With these abrupt, cryptic verses, the Old Testament ends. If this were a movie, we would leave the theater knowing that there was going to be a sequel. Is Elijah going to be resurrected? Is a prophet coming or is God going to strike the land? What is about to happen next?

But then God goes silent. There is no further prophecy for about 400 years until Luke's Gospel tells about Advent. It picks up where Malachi ended. After no words from God for about 400 years, God appears to be active again. But the truth is that God never stopped being active. God was orchestrating, coordinating, weaving details, and surprises together for the right time. That time has come.

The next part of God's story is about to unfold. The "sequel" has begun, and it is unexpected. It is "go time!"

The main characters both righteous: Zechariah, a priest, and Elizabeth, a descendant of Aaron

"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. Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old." (Luke 1:5-7).

Zechariah is a priest. Priests, like ministers today, worked at the temple, managed its upkeep, taught the scriptures, and directed worship services. Zechariah was a spiritual leader and a learned man who knew the scriptures. At the time of Zechariah, there were about 20,000 priests in the country, but

only one temple. Priests were divided into groups (called orders) of about 1,000 priests in each order. Zechariah's group was the order of Abijah. Each order would serve in the temple for one week, two times a year.

Luke notes that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes. Elizabeth, a direct descendant of Aaron, Moses' brother and the first High Priest of Israel, had a strong spiritual heritage of her own. Zechariah was considered especially blessed to have a wife with her lineage and background. None of this means that they were sinless.

Children were considered God's greatest blessing. The culture of that day assumed that God-fearing people like Zechariah and Elizabeth would have had many children. The fact that they were childless invited suspicion, scorn, judgment, or disgrace. Luke makes clear that their childlessness was not a punishment or judgment from God. The culture may have seen no children as a punishment from God, but that is not how God saw it. God saw Zechariah and Elizabeth as righteous, godly, and faithful. Sometimes we have to keep our focus on how God sees us, and reject how the world may see us. This biblical principle of truth is repeated in other scriptural texts.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are very old without children; they were not expecting that would change. These details may seem like unimportant footnotes, but actually, they are very important tidbits. They are core to God's surprise. It is in these details that we see God at work in the unexpected.

Zechariah chosen as priest to enter the Holy Place in the Temple and burn incense offering

"One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying." (Luke 1:8-10). This is the week that Zechariah's group is on duty in the temple. During this week, a priest serving in the temple would enter the Holy Place to burn an incense offering. The casting of lots decided which priest would have the honor of doing this. Zechariah's name was chosen. Surprise!

Offering incense before the Lord was considered a great privilege. A priest was only allowed to do it once in their entire life. With each order containing about 1,000 priests, some priests never got the opportunity to serve by burning incense. When chosen by lot, Zechariah was as surprised as anyone. We know it was not just a random chance. God was moving; God was at work in the unexpected.

In the Holy Place, Zechariah's job was to burn incense and to pray for nation's deliverance

At this time, God's children of Israel were not in slavery or captivity. However, they were under Roman rule and oppression. They were praying for a Savior to deliver them and restore the Kingdom of David. The other priests and faithful people who had assembled waited outside the temple. When the people saw the smoke from the burning incense drifting upward they also would join in the prayers for deliverance and salvation. The smoke drifting upwards symbolized their prayers ascending to God's throne. Faithful followers of God had been doing this since their captivity in Babylon, 600 years prior. That day as described by Luke was different; God had an unexpected plan in store. Surprise!

While Zechariah performed his duties in the Holy Place, an angel of the Lord appeared

"While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him" (Luke 1:11-12). The angel of the Lord, Gabriel, appeared to the right of the incense altar. The right side was considered a position of blessing or favor. Gabriel's position suggests something good and positive is about to happen. When he saw Gabriel and heard his voice, Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear. Fear is usually the case when angels appear in the realm of humanity. Wouldn't you also be shaken?

The angel tells Zechariah “Don’t be afraid” for God has heard your prayer

“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. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord’ (Luke 1: 13-15a).

What prayer is the angel referring to? Some believe the angel is referring to prayers for Zechariah and Elizabeth to have a son. This seems logical since the angel goes on to say that Elizabeth will bear Zechariah a son and gives great detail about the baby. Details include what his name will be, his mission, and the specific way he will be holy and set apart in the way he lives.

However, the angel could also be talking about Zechariah’s prayer for salvation and deliverance of the nation of Israel. As the priest performing the offering of incense that day, Zechariah would be praying for the nation of Israel when the angel appeared. So it is also reasonable that the angel is responding directly to the prayer of the moment for the salvation of Israel. By this time, Zechariah and Elizabeth may have concluded that after decades of praying for a child, the possibility had passed.

The answer to prayers can be both and not just either/or. Yes, God heard the prayer for salvation and deliverance. Yet, God’s answer also involves their prayer for a child. Even if praying for a child was no longer on their lips, it was a desire that still echoed in their hearts. God heard their prayer for a child.

Gabriel draws from the Book of Malachi to describe the coming baby

“He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be a man filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. 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 1:15b -17). Zechariah’s prayer of deliverance is connected to their prayer for a child. God is doing a broad stroke surprise; God is answering multiple prayers at the same time. Answers to both prayers are part of the story God is unfolding.

Zechariah is in shock, with doubts that bear consequences of being unable to speak

“Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How can I be sure this will happen? I’m an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years. Then the angel said, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news! But now, since you didn’t believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born, for my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time’ (Luke 1: 18-20).

Zechariah is in shock, hearing but not comprehending. Since he was a spiritual leader and biblical teacher, those words from Malachi should have registered and resonated. There are times when we cannot believe what we are seeing and hearing. Our brains get foggy, dumbfounded, and discombobulated. It appears that is what was happening to Zechariah.

Zechariah is still processing, and his doubts bubble to the surface. He focused on his prayer of having a baby. He says, “How can I be sure this will happen? I’m an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years.” In other words, my wife is no spring chicken either.

Gabriel seems taken back that he is being questioned. He reminds Zechariah that he is talking with God’s primary angelic messenger with good news sent directly from God. This is not a figment of Zechariah’s imagination or a dream. Zechariah’s doubt was not without consequence. Gabriel makes the pronouncement that Zechariah would be unable to speak until the baby came. His apparent lack of faith resulted in being silent for six months. However, God was doing something bigger than consequences for Zechariah’s doubt.

Zechariah’s Inability to speak is a sign to the community that something divine has happened

“Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary, wondering why he was taking so long. When he finally did come out, he couldn’t speak to them. Then they realized

from his gestures and his silence that he must have seen a vision in the sanctuary.” (Luke 1: 21-22). When Zechariah comes out of the temple, he is unable to pronounce a blessing as the priest normally does. The community concludes that something happened inside the Holy Place. Zechariah’s predicament becomes a manifestation and testimony of God’s activity and promise. Once John is born, Zechariah is able to speak again. Being able to speak again confirms and bears witness that this is a miracle of God. There is no mistaking or denying this miracle.

Zechariah thrust into a world of silence resulted in Zechariah’s growth

Not being able to speak gave Zechariah a unique opportunity to fellowship with God, study the scriptures, pray, and prepare for the arrival of his son. We see evidence of Zechariah’s growth, reflection, and understanding when John is born. Luke 1, starting with verse 57 we read about the events on how Zechariah discerned what God promised. The entire town celebrates with Zechariah and Elizabeth. When it is time for naming the baby and performing circumcision, the town folk are confused by the name John. There is no one else in Zechariah’s family named John. As soon as Zechariah confirms in writing that the boy’s name is John, Zechariah speaks again. Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and shares what is known as Zechariah’s song of praise. “Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people. He has sent us a mighty Savior from the royal line of his servant David, just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago. Now we will be saved from our enemies and from all who hate us. He has been merciful to our ancestors by remembering his sacred covenant- the covenant he swore with an oath to our ancestor Abraham. We have been rescued from our enemies so that we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live. And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.” (Luke 1:68-79).

Zechariah had a surprise encounter with God that he never expected and that would change his life forever. He was to be the father of the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah! He never saw it!

Elizabeth’s unexpected surprise

When Zechariah’s week of service in the Temple was over, he returned home. Soon afterward, his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months. ‘How kind the Lord is!’ she exclaimed. ‘He has taken away my disgrace of having no children’” (Luke 1: 23-25). Imagine the joy of Elizabeth when she soon became pregnant by an unexpected miracle. A surprise unlike anything she had experienced before.

Application

As we prepare for Jesus’ birthday, how should we apply this story? What can we apply today from this story about our prayer requests, the hoping and waiting, and prayers we may have been holding onto for decades? Know that God can be trusted with the unexpected. The birth of John the Baptist happened just as the angel said. The birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus demonstrate that God is the ultimate promise keeper. Through Jesus, God did exactly what God said. The Divine took on flesh to be with us (John 1:14). Jesus lived with us and became personally acquainted with everything we experience (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus took on our sins and removed the consequence of eternal death (1 Peter 2:24). Jesus redeemed and restored our personal relationship with God and adopted us as his children (Romans 8:15). Jesus made it possible for us to live with him forever (John 14:2-3). The birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus are “drop the mic” promises, because we don’t need anything else. A relationship with God is all we need because God promises to take care of everything else. (Matthew 6:33).

Three things to learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth about relationship with God

First, learn to keep praying. We never know what God is doing and how God's story is unfolding for our good and God's glory. God has the ultimate best story in mind for us. Prayer keeps us close to God, the author of our story and God plan.

Second, learn to expect the unexpected. Be on the lookout for surprises from God. The "Examine Prayer" is a spiritual practice we refer to at SBCC church. This practice involves reviewing your day for the highs and lows, and then noticing where God was in it. This practice helps us become more aware of just how close God is and how God moves and surprises us in unexpected ways.

Third, learn that it is not over until God says it is over. Until God reveals that it is a no, keep hope alive. Keep praying because you simply don't know what God is doing. But you can hold to the promise that God loves you, and God is only about your good, even when it does not feel that way. Since God is good, and God loves surprises, expect the unexpected and choose to trust God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS INCLUDING FOR USE IN FAMILY GROUPS

Sermon Preamble

-Think about the last 24-72 hours. First, give God a praise offering for his wonderful unexpected surprises, a miracle. When did you experience something you did not see coming, or something you did not expect that made you smile, feel loved, or feel blessed?

For context of Luke 1:5-25, we need to reach back to last verses of the Old Testament

-As the Old Testament ended, it was clear that there would be a sequel to God's unfolding plans in the first coming of the Savior. Yet despite no new scripture for 400 years until the New Testament, the clear truth is that God is active throughout, coordinating, weaving details, and surprises together for the right time. How is God similarly active between the New Testament scriptures and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ? Why?

The main characters both righteous: Zechariah, a priest, and Elizabeth, a descendant of Aaron

-On what basis does God declare a person righteous? How does that differ from righteous as defined by the worldly culture? In today's culture, what persons in the eyes of the culture may invite scorn, disgrace, and assumed punishment from God when God sees that person as righteous?

Zechariah chosen as priest to enter Holy Place in the temple and burn incense offering

-How has God chosen to let you participate in serving others that was a blessing for you?

In the Holy Place Temple, Zechariah's job was to burn incense and to pray for nation's deliverance

-As you are engaged in service to benefit others, how has your service provided benefits to you in ways that you did not expect and caught you by surprise?

While Zechariah performed his duties in the Holy Place, an angel of the Lord appeared

-Imagine yourself in the shoes of Zechariah experiencing what he experienced of an angel's physical appearance and audible words. Would you be shaken with fear like Zechariah. Why?

The angel tells Zechariah to fear not, for God has heard his prayer

-On what occasion has God responded to a prayer request that is connected to another prayer request, and God handled both prayer requests with one response?

-How has God responded to prayer requests for relief and deliverance for a group in ways the members of the group would not have expected?

Zechariah is in shock, with doubts that bear consequences of being unable to speak

When have you been reluctant to believe the unexpected is really happening? How did you react in your mind and in your feelings?

Zechariah's muteness is a sign to the community that something divine has happened

-For you, what circumstances indicate that something divine has occurred?

Zechariah thrust into a world of silence resulted in Zechariah's growth

-How did Zechariah experience spiritual growth during his period of enforced silence and muteness until the birth of naming of his son? What lesson is there for us today on the value of listening to God and others rather than much speaking?

Elizabeth's unexpected surprise

-What was the response of Elizabeth to the promise of God that was difficult to see really happening? In praising God for the unexpected, how important is trusting God?

Application

-Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11). When we have faith in relationship with God, why do we not need anything else including assurance mentally or seeing the reality, but instead trust God as the ultimate promise keeper?

Three things to learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth about relationship with God

-Why is it important to keep praying as God unfolds the plan for our good and God's glory?

-How much help to you is the spiritual practice of noticing each day God in the highs and lows of your day?

-Since we do not know the details of the good plan God has for us, why is it important to keep hope alive and not declare it is over until God clearly says no?