

Irvington Presbyterian Church

PO Box 1336 4181 Irvington Avenue, Fremont, CA 94538

510-657-3133

www.irvingtonpres.org

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God's Love on an Elderly Couple

Larry Thorson

Luke 1:5-13

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 well advanced in years. 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.

New International Version

"You better watch out, You better not cry, Better not pout I'm telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town. He's making a list and checking it twice; gonna find out who's naughty and nice. Santa Claus is coming to town. He sees

you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good so be good for goodness sake! O! You better watch out! You better not cry. Better not pout. I'm telling you why: Santa Claus is coming to town."

How many of us did **not** grow up listening and maybe even singing that Christmas classic *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*? It was first sung on Eddie Cantor's radio show in November 1934 and became an instant hit with orders for 500,000 copies of sheet music and more than 30,000 records sold within its first 24 hours on the market.

Written in the midst of the Great Depression, *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* has been one of the most dominant theological statements since. It elevated Santa Claus to a whole new level. Couple that with a Bible verse quoted out of context that says "you have not because you ask not." We love to entertain this belief that what we don't have, can't seem to get, or don't know where to find it will somehow miraculously appear under an indoor tree on a particular morning in December if we don't cry, pout or be naughty.

Growing up, my family lived comfortably and usually whatever I asked for Christmas I usually got. And if I didn't get it, my parents would do everything they could to either help me order it or help me earn the money to buy it. So I grew up believing I could have whatever I wanted within reason, eventually. I appreciate my parents very much. They believed in hard work and discipline. But I will say Christmas gave me a sense of entitlement. If I asked for it, I should receive it because I always did.

We all know, life doesn't work that way forever. I have a deteriorating spine with an aggravated sciatic nerve touched by arthritis. It's a mess. More than anything in the world, I want that healed. The apostle Paul had what he called a "thorn in the flesh" and he continually prayed that God would remove it but it never moved. He had it presumably until he died.

Yet we read in Scripture: *You do not have because you do not ask God. 3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you*

may spend what you get on your pleasures. Where is that found in the Bible? Look it up sometime. It's there.

It is a biblical concept but it's usually misunderstood and gets abused. Asking and receiving is not where the joy comes from. Jesus in his great Sermon on the Mount said this in Matthew 6:25 *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?*

28 “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.”

If there was some way we could convince ourselves that we have everything we need to do our calling there would be endless joy. Let's take the couple in today's Bible reading. They're a really great couple named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. The Bible describes them as good, godly people who want to live life right. They did everything for God they were supposed to do in life including being fortunate enough to be born to the right family, and then growing up to observe all the Lord's commands consistently for a very long time.

But something was missing in their life. It's that one thing that's always missing in our life and it varies from person to person. We may have everything else, but if that one thing is missing we're kept them from feeling complete. For singles it's finding the right mate. For couples it's having children. For renters it's buying their own house. For people riding a bus, it's buying a car. There's always that one thing.

For Elizabeth and Zechariah, it was a child of their own. They held out hope for it until it became biologically too late for them. Where was their God when they needed him? Why keep doing all this religious stuff if there's no reality to it in this life?

Frederick Buechner in his book *A Room Called Remember*, asks why people come to church? He writes: *"My guess is they come because there isn't much else to do on Sunday morning. They come to see their friends and be seen. They come out of habit and tradition. They come to be entertained, maybe even edified. They come...even the ones who in their secret hearts believe very little, with the idea that just maybe there is a God who keeps track of who comes and who doesn't, and it's just as well to keep on his good side."* Sort of "makin' a list and checking it twice, finding out who's naughty and nice" I guess.

"They come year after year, and who is to say how, if at all, their lives were changed as the result? Yet they keep coming anyway; and beneath all the lesser reasons they have for doing so, I think there is a deeper reason, and if I could give it only one word to characterize it, the word I would give it is hope.

They come here to christen their babies and bury their dead and make hallowed their vows, offering up the most precious moments of their lives in the hope that there is a God to hallow them—a God to hear and seal their vows, to receive their children and to raise up and cherish their dead.

Farther down than their daydreams and boredom, there is the hope that somewhere out of all the words and music and silences of this place, and out of a mystery even greater than the mystery of the cosmos itself, they will hear a voice that they will know from all other voices which will speak their names and bless them."¹

That may have been why Zechariah kept going in his service to the Lord. He kept being faithful even when the news he received of no baby wasn't very encouraging. He kept going when it seemed that God may not even exist. He kept

¹ *A Room Called Remember*, pages 31 and 32

going because he never knew when the awe and mystery of God was going to touch his life.

How different are we from Elizabeth and Zechariah? A little different. I mean he was a priest of God and one didn't become a priest just by going to seminary. You had to be born a male from a certain tribe of Israel. That was specific.

Do you remember Moses and his brother Aaron in the Old Testament? All the male descendants of Aaron formed the royal priesthood, and as the years rolled on they multiplied. But there were too many priests to handle the daily religious routine and ritual of the one temple in Jerusalem. So they had to be organized into divisions. They were assigned to work in the temple on a rotating schedule, maybe only serving a few weeks every year. Then within that group serving in the temple, they cast lots, like the roll of the dice, to see who would actually get to offer the incense and lifting the people's prayers to God.

Sure, the fact that he was a Jewish priest made him a little different from us. But he walked, breathed, ate and slept just like we do. He had similar emotions and temptations to overcome. The same for Elizabeth. They weren't gods living above it all. They were humans like us who had never given up even when they couldn't get that one thing they most wanted.

Then there was this day in the temple. It probably started like any other day when the lot just seemed to randomly fall to Zechariah for him to enter the Holy Place in the temple on behalf of the people to offer incense. But was it really random? Is anything really random? We don't know. Maybe not. We do know the people waited, as normal outside, praying at the hour of incense while the priests now including Zechariah were in the temple with God.

Only God knows what Zechariah was thinking or what he was expecting that day when he stepped into the temple, the holiest of holy places. It sort of reminds me of going to see Santa at Macy's in New York City which our 18 month old grandson got to do on the day after Thanksgiving this year. Only he didn't see Santa as the possible source of things he might want and was more interested in the

big train set they had set up there than the hairy man in red. If James could only remain that way.

We don't know if Zechariah saw going into God's presence in the temple as something similar to going to see the Oz in the Wizard of Oz or Santa or whether he was just awed to have the privilege of serving. The other priests on the other days never reported anything special happening to them when they had the privilege. It's like when I stand up and preach, most weeks very little of the holy seems to happen. We just sing, share, give and I preach week after week. We rarely, if ever see miracles happen in our service and so we come to not expect them. That's ok with me. Occasionally there's a stronger sense of God's presence with us, but most of the time we just plug on. That's what we're called to do and if God wants to break into that God can break into it.

But Zechariah comes to this high and holy moment, with all the mix of emotions, not the least of which is the tragedy of his own life, the desire for a child he can't seem to have. And lo and behold, right there in the midst of them all, right there to the right of the altar of incense, right in the midst of the ritual, an angel of the Lord appears. Of course the encounter took him completely by surprise. Note Luke's incredible understatement: *"he was startled and was gripped with fear."* The Eugene Peterson translation in the Message is probably closer to the mark when it says, "He was paralyzed with fear!" I doubt he could even scream at this point.

Listen again to what 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."*

"Your prayer has been heard?" Think about that statement. What prayer do you think is not heard by God? Remember that list of things Jesus said we worry about (and for some of us even pray about) *"do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear."* Remember that? Then he went on to say in Matthew 6:33 said: *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*

God is not Santa and Santa is fortunately not God. I've always said that God hears all our prayers. That may be true but there's no Scriptural evidence for that. We like to believe that's true and it sounds warm and cozy. But the reality is many couples die childless despite deep faith and constant prayers for a child. When the Apostle Paul prayed that God would take away his thorn in the flesh, it didn't happen. And the idea that God answers all our prayers with a yes, no or not yet is just an excuse to take God off the hook.

The reality is that the Bible says God loves us very much. But whatever actions God takes with us is not necessarily for our pleasure. If it happens to bring pleasure to us then that's a double blessing. But God has the ultimate good of the world in his sight. In the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth he could have chosen another couple to give birth to a boy who would grow up to be John the Baptist. He could have. God's concern wasn't just for Zechariah and Elizabeth but that the world needed John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. That's big picture stuff.

If our our desires are to better glorify God and spread his message of love to the world then we already have everything we need to do that. Sure, I'd like to do that in a 20 year old body and not a 62 year old broken body but I don't need that new body to glorify God.

When those of us who have more than we need share with those who have less then we become answered prayers for those in need. And we're blessed. That's how our annual Christmas party for Jesus works when we bring unwrapped gifts for those less fortunate than ourselves.

I will continue praying for healing for my back probably until I die. I believe that back will be healed if and when God needs my body to do something that it can't now do to bring glory and honor to him. Right now, God can be glorified in my weakness. God was glorified in Zechariah and Elizabeth's weakness. When they finally had a child, by the grace of God, that child, John the Baptist had a purpose to prepare the people for the coming of the Christ. The birth of that child wasn't just for Zechariah and Elizabeth's pleasure or to overcome

their embarrassment over childlessness. God blesses us to be a blessing to someone else.

Remember, spiritually speaking, that regardless of what present we open under the tree, whether it's a big surprise or something expected like socks, God loves us and wants to use us to be a source of healing in this world. Whatever we receive, it's not necessarily for our pleasure but to pass on to help someone else in the name of Jesus. Amen.

TO LEARN MORE

**Join a Life Group
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To learn and encourage one another

IF YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW HOW TO GET STARTED IN FAITH

- 1. Recognize that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's ideal**
Romans 3:23-24
- 2. Know that the wages or payment for sinning is death**
Romans 6:23
- 3. But God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to die for us**
Romans 5:8
- 4. It is our responsibility to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and allow Him to become the master of our life**
Romans 10:13

Invite Jesus into your heart by praying something like the prayer below...

"Dear Lord Jesus, in many ways I have sinned against you. I am sorry and want to turn from my sinful ways. I invite you to come into my heart and begin to make me like yourself. I commit my life wholeheartedly to you now. Thank you for saving me."