

THE MAIN THING: God's final preparation for Jesus' birth was through Elizabeth and Zechariah. They illustrate three roadblocks that can deter us from celebrating Christmas—God's silence, our disappointments or unbelief. In spite of these roadblocks, the same God who acted 2000 years ago is active today.

PURSUE RELATIONSHIP: *Connect and pray as a group*

1. In what ways do you prepare for Christmas? Outwardly? Inwardly?
2. Have you ever had a baby born in your family at Christmas? Describe what that was like?
3. What disappointments dampened a Christmas celebration?

PURSUE GOD: *Time that is devoted to the Word of God*

Observation and Reflection

1. Pastor Ashwin made three points: God is at work in the silence; God is at work in the midst of disappointment; God is at work despite our unbelief. Read Luke 1:5-25 out loud and point to the specific verses that highlight each of these points. With which one do you identify most: experiencing God's silence? Elizabeth's disappointment? Zechariah's unbelief?
2. How did Zechariah and Elizabeth symbolize the 'silence' experienced by God's people (refer to Malachi 4:2)? For more information on the Intertestamental Period, http://www.zionbaptistchurchtaylor.com/pastorspace/intertestamental_period_prep_christianity.pdf
3. What were the implications of Elizabeth's barrenness? How did this disappointment affect Zechariah?
4. In spite of Zechariah's unbelief, how did God use it for a 'divine intervention'? Relate your answer back to Moses' instructions in Exodus 14:13, 14.

Application.

1. Share an experience when you felt God's silence, making it a time of disappointment and/or unbelief. Were you able to take time to reflect on God's work? How does the message about Zechariah and Elizabeth help you understand that God is still at work during difficult times?
2. How can Psalm 46:10 apply to our preparation for the celebration of Christ's birth?
3. Take time to be silent as an individual or as a small group. (For example, be silent for nine minutes – one minute for each month of E's pregnancy). Let your first words then be, 'Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.' (Luke 1:68)

THE WORD (NIV)

Malachi 4:2

²But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves.

Luke 1:5-25, 68

... 1:68

⁶⁸"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

Exodus 14:13,14

¹³Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. ¹⁴The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."

Psalm 46:10

¹⁰He says, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

Getting Ready for Christmas.

Parents of a newborn know what it means to prepare for a baby. Imagine the preparation required for God to arrive on earth as a baby. God planned meticulously, orchestrating events in history, choosing when to bring His Son into the world. As God prepared the way for Christ's coming, do we prayerfully prepare our hearts to receive Jesus and celebrate His birth?

God's final preparation for Jesus' birth was through Zechariah and Elizabeth. They illustrate three roadblocks that can deter us from celebrating Christmas – the silence of God, disappointments and unbelief. Though we face these roadblocks, the same God who acted 2000 years ago is active today.

God is at work even in the silence! After God spoke through Malachi.(4:2), there was a long pause, 400 years of silence with no word from God nor visible sign of Messiah as prophesied. The people of God were oppressed by empire after empire including the Roman empire under King Herod. During 400 years of silence, God was at work behind the scenes preparing to reveal Himself through a Person: Jesus Christ. Few righteous people were waiting for God. Zechariah and Elizabeth, righteous, ordinary people, were from priestly families, advanced in years with no children. (Lk 1:5-25) When the angel appeared to Zechariah, God spoke, breaking the silence and showing His plan of redemption.

Sometimes God does His most profound work in our lives through silence. Is that your experience today? Maybe God is working actively behind the scenes or He is speaking through the stillness. Be encouraged and don't equate God's silence with inactivity. Silence is a time to prepare for what God is about to do in your life.

2. God is at work in the midst of our disappointments. Zechariah and Elizabeth were godly yet struggled with deep disappointment--longing for a child but unable to conceive. Elizabeth felt the stigma of barrenness and was held responsible. Zechariah was righteous, standing by her in her pain. They had no one to carry the family name. The God whom they served faithfully had not answered their cry.

Zechariah, chosen to serve as priest, entered the temple. With burning coals in his hand, he ignited the incense on the altar and fell on his face before the Holy of Holies. Zechariah must have prayed for the redemption of Israel through Messiah and maybe he added his unanswered prayer for a baby, Years of disappointment turned into God's divine appointment. The angel of God appeared saying his prayers were answered--the long standing prayer for Israel's redemption and their prayer for a child. God gave them a son who would prepare the way for Messiah and bring joy to many. (1:8-17)

When Elizabeth did get pregnant, she recognized that this could only be the Lord. (1:23-25) The prolonged years of emotional pain taught her to see this miracle as a work of God. God was still in control with a purpose and plan behind her disappointments.

God is at work despite our unbelief. When the angel had delivered the good news that Elizabeth would have a son who would be part of God's redemptive plan, Zechariah responded in unbelief. (1:18) He questioned the angel, saying they were too old to have a child; from a human perspective it was impossible. The very prayer Zechariah had prayed for years was finally answered but he was not ready to receive it. Years of anticipation had become frustration and unbelief, questioning God's ability to intervene. Zechariah was made mute, unable to speak. He became a spectator watching God work. (Ex 14:13-14). When his son was born, Zechariah wrote "John" and then he loudly praised the Lord. (Lk 1:62-68) Do we just go through the motions when we pray? Are we shocked when God actually answers? How often do we underestimate God and He sees our unbelief? The entire Christmas story is about divine intervention: salvation is divine intervention, Jesus Christ born as a baby is divine intervention. As we by faith believe wholeheartedly in Jesus, we become witnesses to the greatest story ever told.

Which roadblocks keep you from celebrating Jesus' birth? Bring them to God in prayer.