

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

December 10, 2017, Pastor Jeff Harrison

Challenges at Christmas

Luke 1:5-66

I. Introduction:

A. An accident shows we face challenges at Christmas

Wow, wasn't our joint Spanish and English choir awesome? Revelation, the last book of the Bible, talks about people from every nation, tribe, and language in heaven praising Jesus together. I think our choir this morning was a beautiful rehearsal, different languages, races, and nationalities together as one, praising Jesus here at Northwest.

SECOND SERVICE – And we want our brothers and sisters in the Spanish service to also experience the blessings of our choir, so we're doing things differently this morning. I'll preach now, as the choir sings at Encuentro, and after I preach we'll conclude this worship service by singing three songs of praise together.

Now it is a blessing to see God at work in things like our Spanish speaking ministry and our choir and to praise Him for it, but we also know it's not always easy to praise Jesus at Christmastime.

Back when I was 17, I had a challenging Christmas. That year, on Christmas Eve, I was out buying some last-minute presents. And the next thing I know, I'm in a head-on accident, with a Suburban. So, needless to say, my car lost. In that moment, I feel an overwhelming surge of pain. I look down, horrified to see my knee has instantly swollen to twice its normal size.

In a moment I went from carefree to freaking out, my mind racing with thoughts like "Will I ever walk normally again?" There was certainly no praise coming out of my mouth that Christmas Eve. Actually, the first words out of my mouth were profane. I was taken by ambulance to the hospital, where I found out that I shattered my kneecap, requiring major surgery, bed rest, and then months of challenging rehab. Merry Christmas.

B. What can we learn from the first Christians about facing challenges?

Now I know I'm not the only one who has faced challenge at Christmas, some of us are in the middle of one right now. A devastating disease, a wrecked relationship, the loss of a loved one. And as broken people in a broken world, we all face some level of challenge at Christmas. Maybe it's stress about having way to much to do, or mounting bills, or an upcoming visit with difficult family members.

So as we prepare for Christmas, it's important for us to consider, "What can we learn from the first believers in Jesus about facing challenges?" Let's turn to God's Word for guidance in Luke chapter 1. Luke chapter 1. Luke is one of the gospels, the four books in the Bible about Jesus living on earth, dying on the cross for our sins, and rising from the dead. And here at the beginning of Luke's account, we'll glean insight on facing challenges from the first believers in Jesus.

II. An older godly couple deal with doubt as God moves "too slowly" (Luke 1:5-25)

We'll start in verse 5 of Luke chapter 1. Please follow along as I read. **(5-7)**

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.

Here we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth, a very godly couple, described in verse six with words like righteous and blameless. And not only that, they both have a godly family heritage, coming from priestly families. A godly couple from godly families.

Yet they carry the deep pain of years of infertility, and now they're elderly, it's too late. And not only do they struggle, their people, Israel do too. It's been about 400 years since the last time Israel has heard from God, and for generations they've been under foreign oppression.

Despite these personal and national challenges, Zechariah keeps faithfully serving as a priest. Back then, the priests were split up into 24 divisions that took turns serving at the temple in Jerusalem. And one week, as Zechariah's division serves, he gets a special assignment, starting in verse 8. **(8-10)**

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.

Each day at the temple, the place where God's presence dwelled in a special way, the priests made a morning and evening sacrifice. And one priest was chosen by lot to go in the temple and offer incense. The offering of incense was symbolic of their prayer going up to God, asking God to accept favorably the sacrifice of His people.

Because there were about 18,000 priests total¹, a priest could only offer the incense once. So Zechariah, now an old man, finally gets his once in a lifetime chance to be the priest who offers the incense. A Bible commentary I read described this as the climactic moment of his priestly career.² And an amazing thing happens at this amazing moment, starting in verse 11. **(11-12)**

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.

So this angel unexpectedly appears to Zechariah, and he's freaked out. And the angel speaks, starting in verse 13, saying: **(13-17)**

“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.”

The angel tells Zechariah that God is answering his prayers. And not only is God finally providing him with a child, but God will bless the whole nation through his miracle child. God's people have been waiting 400 long years for a word from God, and Zechariah's boy will be that prophet. And get this, he is even going to prepare the way for the Lord, Jesus Himself!

Zechariah has just gotten incredible news for himself and God's people, so let's see how this godly man responds to it in verse 18.

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.”

Zechariah has faithfully served the Lord for years. And he's a priest, so he knows the Old Testament story of Abraham and Sarah having a child in their old age. And he's

¹ Commentaries I read referenced the ancient *Letter of Aristeas* as their source for the 18,000 estimate.

² Liefeld & Pao, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Luke-Acts (Revised Edition)*, in Luke 1 section.

experiencing this amazing angelic revelation while in God's temple, and yet he still struggles with doubt, asking, "How can I be sure of this?"

Perhaps, like me, you appreciate how honestly the Bible portrays God's people and can even identify with Zechariah's doubt. Maybe there's something you've been praying about for years, and you've given up hope that God will show up in the way you long for. Or perhaps you struggle to believe one of God's promises to all believers, like His unending love for you, even at your ugliest moments.

I'm sure Zechariah prayed so many times for a child, for years, and now, even though he's before an angel, he doubts this promise. The angel responds strongly in verse 19, saying: **(19-20)**

"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."

In his doubt, Zechariah wants a sign that God's promise will occur. He gets his request, but it's not the kind of sign he hoped for. For now he is unable to speak, an ongoing reminder of his struggle with doubt.

One of my seminary professors, Darrell Bock, notes that, "Doubt is not unbelief, but it is not faith either. When it comes to what God has promised, doubt hangs in a dangerous canyon between faith and unbelief." As Zechariah is unable to speak, he, and us, are to learn about the importance of trusting in God's promises.³

Now as Zechariah has this angelic encounter, it's the hour of evening prayer at the temple. Those praying begin to wonder, and perhaps worry, about what's happened to Zechariah inside. Look at verse 21 with me. **(21-22)**

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.

After offering incense, when the priest exited the temple, he would give the people who were praying a blessing. Ironically, Zechariah just received this absolutely amazing news, not

³ Darrell Bock, *Luke, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, in Luke 1 section.

only for himself, for the whole nation; but because of his doubt, he cannot speak, and the people leave with no blessing or idea that Jesus is coming. The account continues in verse 23: **(23-25)**

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.”

As the angel promised, Elizabeth becomes pregnant in old age. After years of challenge, as verse 25 says, Elizabeth reflects on how the Lord has shown His favor. Later in the story others will be blessed by this godly older woman meditating on God’s favor.

II. A young godly woman experiences God moving “too quickly” (Luke 1:23-38)

But for now we shift to a young woman who receives a big surprise, starting in verse 26. **(26-27)**

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.

Here we meet Mary, a girl living in a small town who is pledged to be married. Being pledged to be married is kind of like being engaged today. But being pledged was more serious, involving a legally binding agreement between the two families. Yet the couple was not yet married, so they were not to have sexual relations. And now Mary, this seemingly ordinary young woman living in an unextraordinary place, receives a huge surprise in verse 28, which says: **(28-29)**

²⁸ The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” ²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

Mary, like Zechariah before, is troubled by Gabriel, so he tries to reassure Mary in verse 30, which says: **(30-33)**

³⁰ But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

Talk about a bombshell. Gabriel informs Mary that God has graced her with the privilege of being the mother of the Son of God Himself. Mary has a question, asking in verse 34:

³⁴ “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

Unlike Zechariah, Mary does not demand a sign, rather, she is just trying to understand how in the world a virgin could bear God’s Son. So the angel explains further in verse 35, saying: **(35-37)**

“The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail.”

Amazingly, Mary responds with submissive faith, saying to the angel in verse 38:

³⁸ “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

III. All three experience challenges, yet end praising Jesus (1:39-66)

A. Elizabeth and Mary show that godly people can help us praise Jesus

Mary has commendable faith, but that doesn’t mean everything is peachy. She has just taken on something incredible that will also be incredibly challenging.

For Mary is about to be pregnant before married in a small town with a traditional culture. You know people are very good at calculating whether a baby was conceived before or after marriage, and also good, perhaps especially in a traditional small town, of gossiping about it. Shame will be brought on her, her family, and her fiancé Joseph. And is there any way that her family and Joseph will believe that explanation from Gabriel?

Imagine that conversation. “I know this looks bad Mom, Dad, Joseph, but you see, I’m pregnant with God’s Son because God’s power overshadowed me.” “Oh okay.” Mary herself probably still has no idea after Gabriel’s explanation how a virgin could bear the infinite, timeless Son of God.

When we discussed Luke 1 in class in seminary, that professor I mentioned earlier noted that the passage does not say how old Mary is. However, we do know that a girl back then was typically be pledged to be married around age 13. So not only is Mary facing this challenge, but, as my professor was fond of reminding us, she was likely facing it at the age of today’s 7th or 8th grader.

So Mary needs some help. And interestingly, back in verse 36, Gabriel mentioned Elizabeth. Perhaps Gabriel mentioned Elizabeth not only to bolster Mary's faith that God can accomplish the impossible, but also to suggest that Mary visit Elizabeth. Thankfully, Mary sees that she can't face this challenge alone, so, as verse 39 says: **(39-40)**

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

At this point Elizabeth is about six months pregnant with her miracle baby. But that doesn't mean everything is perfect – Zechariah hasn't been able to speak for months, and given how Luke describes the couple, I think we're safe in assuming that their marriage was not the kind filled with so much conflict that Elizabeth enjoyed Zechariah's silence. And Elizabeth is dealing with all the challenges of pregnancy as an elderly woman.

But, as we saw back in verse 25, Elizabeth has been reflecting on God's favor towards her, and it shows when she is in the Lord's presence in verse 41, which says: **(41-45)**

⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Godly Elizabeth, filled with God's Spirit here, responds with praise. And Elizabeth encourages Mary. Elizabeth shares about how blessed Mary is to be Jesus' mother and she encourages Mary's faith in believing that God will fulfill His promises to her.

Sometimes in our challenges, we can be tempted to think that no one understands and that we're all alone. But if God can provide Mary, in her unique challenges, with someone to help, He can provide you with someone too. Like Mary, when we're facing challenges, we can't do life alone. And thankfully, Mary realized this and hurried to Elizabeth.

And Elizabeth was the perfect person to help. She already cares about Mary, is a godly, mature woman, and having her own miraculous pregnancy, is the person best positioned to understand what Mary is going through. I like how Pastor Craig Barnes expresses their relationship and its connection to our lives.

“As the Bible constantly illustrates, God's timing usually takes us by surprise. Sometimes, as with Elizabeth, God moves too slowly. Sometimes, as with Mary, he moves too quickly. Like Elizabeth, some of you in church today have been praying for a long time for something to happen. You think now that it may never happen. Obviously you can't make it happen, because if you could have, you would have. Clearly, you are not in control. Like Mary, others of you find that your lives are all disheveled this year. God has conceived something in your life that you didn't ask for. It doesn't make any sense. You are frightened, confused, and, clearly, you are not in control either.

When we come together in worship we are all confessing that, in spite of looking so different, at least we share a common limitation of not being in control of our lives. We have entered God's house. It is fascinating that, according to Luke's gospel, after Mary discovered that she would give birth to the Messiah the first person she went to, with haste, was not Joseph or her parents but her relative Elizabeth whose life was also clearly out of control. This means that the very first church service, the first community of believers brought together by the presence of Christ, were two pregnant women.”⁴

And as Mary is impacted by Elizabeth's godly perspective, Mary joins her in praising God, starting in verse 46, which says: **(46-55)**

⁴⁶ And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful

⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”

These verses are filled with Mary praising God for His gracious work in her life and the lives of God's people. Elizabeth has helped Mary have a rich faith in God, leading to praise.

⁴ http://nationalpres.org/sites/default/files/sermon_bulletins/2000.12.17.Barnes.pdf

And in the challenges of life, we have that same opportunity to help each other have faith that leads to praise.

Three months later, as verse 56 says, Mary heads home, and Elizabeth prepares to have her baby in verse 57, which says: **(57-62)**

⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. ⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.” ⁶¹ They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.” ⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child.

B. Zechariah shows that staying engaged with God can lead to mature praise

Here in verse 63, we return to Zechariah, who after years of infertility, struggled to believe God’s promise. Let’s see if he’s learned anything as he’s observed Elizabeth and Mary’s faith and wrestled with God during his months of forced silence. Verse 63 says:

⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.”

The custom was to name a baby after an ancestor, but Zechariah instead names the baby John, just as the angel Gabriel instructed. A step of faith from the man who struggled to believe. And verse 64 goes on to say: **(64-66)**

⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

His faith in God’s promises restored, Zechariah is set free. And the first words out of his mouth are praise to God. In his doubt, Zechariah left the temple unable to speak, unable to bless. But now, Zechariah’s faith-filled praise blesses the people. As verse 65 says, “All the neighbors were filled with awe.”

My seminary professor aptly describes Zechariah’s journey, saying, “The maturing of pious Zechariah’s faith pictures one who struggles to accept what God has promised. Zechariah shows that even the faith of pious people can pause, and then develop added depth... Now Zechariah has assurance about God’s promise. He is to trust that God can deliver on His

promises – which is an important lesson for the doubting. Zechariah also responds in obedience, obedience that Mary gave without hesitation. Faith for some comes slowly and for others more naturally, but in the end, the call is to emulate these saints with their notes of joy, expectation, and belief.”⁵

III. Conclusion

A. We all face challenges at Christmas

We all face challenges at Christmas, some of us, overwhelming ones. So as Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary did some 2,000 years ago, may we help each other to praise God.

B. Let’s help each other to praise God

That’s our application. As a church family, let’s help each other to praise God.

Maybe this morning you’re like Zechariah at the beginning. You think God is moving “too slowly” and struggle with doubt. Maybe you’re even at a point where you feel like you just can’t take another step.

May we, like Zechariah, be honest about our doubt, and do our best to stay engaged, even as we struggle. For Zechariah didn’t walk away from God or the church of his day or stop serving when things were hard. Like Zechariah, as we stay engaged, it is possible for us to reach a point, by God’s grace, where we praise Him once more.

After I shattered my kneecap that Christmas Eve long ago, I was really down. But while bedridden, and then journeying through a difficult rehabilitation, God met me, growing my faith significantly through that trial. He brought me to a point where I praised Him more deeply than ever before.

And may we also do our best to learn from Mary, who needed help as God moved “too fast”. Thankfully, rather than trying to do life alone, Mary quickly sought a godly person’s help. One who would not deny the challenges that Mary was facing, but who helped Mary to also see the amazing things God was up to and how she, along with every believer in Jesus, is so blessed.

Looking back now, I see how God provided for me relationally after my car accident with a couple of godly people who pointed me to Him. People who were like Elizabeth’s to me. Their walks with God putting them in a position to be ready to be used by God as they helped me to praise Him. May we all be more like Elizabeth here for each other.

⁵ Darrell Bock, *Luke, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, in Luke 1 section.

These life changing interactions can happen, one on one, in a small group, and here in the worship service, which is one reason why it's so important to come consistently. So way to go for being here today.

For even during a pretty good week it can be easy to get frustrated, distracted from walking with God, or stuck in sin. That pastor I quoted earlier says that our heart can start to sound like a bad committee meeting, with various voices vying for attention and trying to hijack the agenda. And God help us, when on top of all that, a huge challenge comes, things can get so, so hard.

It's why we need to be among God's people every week encouraging each other, praying, hearing from God's Word, singing songs of praise together. I find it interesting that in Luke chapter 1 Elizabeth, Mary, and then Zechariah all end by praising God. All their challenges hadn't gone away, but as they also saw God's amazing work and promises, they were moved to praise.

We don't have time to read them all, but verses 68-79 are filled with Zechariah praising God because redemption in Jesus has come, and that's what Christmas is all about. Jesus humbly coming among us, on a rescue mission, to forgive all our sins, to bring salvation. Why did Jesus come? As Zechariah says it in verses 78-79; why?

⁷⁸because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
⁷⁹to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

Northwest, let's help each other to praise our amazing God.

FIRST ONLY - Let's pray...

Dismissal – Go in peace to love the Lord.

SECOND ONLY – Let's pray...

So now we get to immediately apply this message together as we sing praise to God. So worship team, please come now to the front. And may our praise now not be the end of our worship, but rather the beginning of a week filled with praise. That praise renewed as we gather together again next Sunday to help each other praise God.