

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth based on Luke 1:5-25; 57-79 at Victory of the Lamb on December 4, 2016.

Series: The Way It Was
Today's Focus: Zechariah—the Lord remembers

“God has not forgotten you (even when it feels like it!)”

You ever have people who know you as your kid's dad or mom? It's kind of like that for me. My name is Zechariah, although some of you might perhaps know me better as John's dad. The kind with the famous nickname, John the Baptist. Have you heard of him? Judging by the outline of your sermon series on your website it looks like you'll get to meet him next Sunday if you haven't...which is good. He has an extremely important message to share with you to help you be prepared for Christmas just as he once helped prepare people to meet Jesus Christ in the flesh. And I'm proud of him for being a faithful prophet of the Lord even when it meant a lot of folks didn't want to hear what he had to say. So overall, I'm quite ok with being known as John's dad. I was so blessed to be his father.

Because the thing is, after a while, I had kind of stopped expecting that I would ever get to actually be a dad. I mean there was a time when I was young and newly married to my wonderful bride Elizabeth that I held out the hope that I would get to hold a son in my arms. You see not only did I long to be a father, but in our culture, and especially with me being a priest, your family line matters. My family and my wife's family...we go back all the way to the Aaron, the first high priest. But as the years went by it looked like the family line would end with me—from Aaron to Zechariah just like A to Z. It's the cynical way you start to think about the alphabet when you're not cheerfully teaching it to a toddler.

Any of you ever wonder, “Where do all the years go?” Or “My, how fast time flies!?” Well as the years went by it started to feel like maybe God had forgotten about me. Some of you have had that feeling too, haven't you? You've prayed and you've prayed and...what happens? Nothing. You demand an answer...and what do you hear? Silence. Or am I the only one to wonder, going to church, faithfully trying to serve the Lord my whole life... “Is anybody up there even listening? Does he even care? Has God forgotten me?” Which I know, sounds kind of ridiculous considering my name actually means, “The Lord remembers.” But sometimes I thought this was a particularly cruel kind of irony. Because it sure felt like God had forgotten me, that he had forgotten my wife Elizabeth, us.

I mean, I can remember it like it was yesterday. Our wedding day. Elizabeth and I. So much optimism we had. Youthfulness. Joy. In a way I'm kind of glad we don't have all the digital pictures and Instagrams that you all have today because I'm not sure I'd even recognize us anymore that was so long ago. We were so much younger then. So many of our loved ones and friends hadn't yet gone home to be the Lord. When Elizabeth and I thought about our future together, we had all these hopes and dreams then. The future was before us. We imagined

having a family. We talked about what names we liked and didn't like. We had dreams for our kids.

And then slowly at first those dreams started to die. That ever happen to you? It's hard to explain. And it feels kind of selfish to admit. You see other people having baby showers, celebrating birthdays, festival days with their family, posting things on Facebook...and you're happy for them...but deep down it also increases your pain. It magnifies your sense of loss.

And I never realized it when I was single (how could I? I suppose) but when you're married...the two really do become one flesh. The joys of life are magnified. It's wonderful to have a companion to share those special moments with! But the sorrows of life are magnified too. To see her empty, hurting, my dear Elizabeth...only magnified my own hurt too. I didn't understand that. I just wanted to fix it. I wanted to give her a child, and I couldn't. I wanted to make her happy, and I couldn't. And so I felt empty. I couldn't help but feel like I was a failure in her eyes. I blamed myself. And because I considered myself a failure (I didn't realize this at the time) I involuntarily contributed to her own feelings of failure and shame when she thought about herself. Because she truly wanted to give me a son. She thought she was letting me down. And truth is we were both just hurting. We were together (sure, we had each other!) and yet sometimes each of us felt alone. Any of you know what I'm talking about?

Then there was my job. Like I mentioned, I was a priest. There was no end to the work to be done, the rituals to be performed, the prayers to be uttered. In some ways the routine of it was good therapy. You see I don't mean to suggest in sharing my story that I had a bad life or a lacking marriage. Quite the contrary. Elizabeth and I enjoyed many good days together. We stuck with each other and supported each other in sickness and in health all those years. And God blessed us. Our extended family was always close at-hand. We regularly worshipped the Lord together and put our trust in the promises of Messiah yet to come just like our fathers before us. And deep down we kept holding onto to the dream of a family even if it remained unspoken. After all, hadn't God done the impossible before? Hadn't he chosen our father Abraham and given him a son in his old age when he was as good as dead?

So I kept a prayer deep in my heart. A prayer I would sometimes think about as I served the Lord. A prayer that was rekindled every time I thought for example about the Passover meal and what it would be like to have a son who asked, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" I knew how I would answer. I would tell the story of God's mighty deliverance from Egypt. I would preach about the uplifted arm of the Lord who made a way through the sea and rescued his people. I would explain how it was all possible because of a lamb—the Passover lamb whose substitutionary death and shed blood foreshadowed what one day only a perfect sinless Lamb of God could accomplish for the sins of the world.

It's funny what goes through your mind sometimes at church, isn't it? You ever find yourself daydreaming in the middle of your Pastor Ben's sermons? You see there I was in the temple. It

was my turn. I'd waited almost my whole life for this opportunity to enter into the holy place by myself to offer incense for the morning and evening sacrifices. A once in a lifetime opportunity!

And that's when an even greater opportunity arrived because the angel Gabriel showed up. You know who he is, right? One of the highest-ranking warriors in God's angel army who also serves as a special messenger. And I won't hide the fact that my reaction was that I thought I was going to die. I told as much to Luke when he interviewed me for his gospel book. I was that terrified, me a sinful old man in the presence of a holy messenger of God. You would be too! But what a message he shared! The first words out of his mouth were, "**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.**" And he went on to say something like, "He's going to be super special. He's going to bring you joy. He's going to make you proud. He's going to be great because he's going to prepare the way in people's heart to receive someone even greater—their Savior."

You know the expression "Sounds too good to be true", right? Well, there's a part of me that thought that too. As great as the angel's message was, I hesitated. My heart hesitated to believe. It's a frustrating thing how faith and doubt vie for our hearts, isn't it? Here was a holy messenger of God telling me that God had been listening to my prayers all along, that he is going to finally grant my heart's desire...and my reaction was hesitation. It shows you, doesn't it, that we all really stand in the same place...we all need a Savior...priests and pastors and all of us people together? I may have been wearing the special garments of a priest who was privileged to represent the people before God in the holy place of the temple in Jerusalem, but I stood there as one every bit as needy as the worshippers outside and every bit as needy as any of you. God would've been right and just and fair to have officially turned his back on me from that moment forward. He could've said, "Well if that's how you're going to react to me, then forget you."

But he didn't. Yes, God had to teach me to patiently wait on him—it wasn't fun not being able to talk for a couple months—but it was really a blessing because it gave me time to reflect on God's promises and pray them back to him because he hadn't forgotten about me. He didn't say, "Forget you." And what this mean friends is that he isn't going to say, "Forget you either" either—not for all the times you've been slow to pray or for all the times you've been so slow to believe the words of God.

It turns out my name was a sermon all along. *Zechariah*—"*The Lord remembers.*" He didn't forget about me. And he hasn't forgotten about you either. The Lord remembers you—the one he loves, whom he claimed as his own through the waters of your baptism, the one whom he loves to hear from when you pray even when it's the same thing over and over again. He doesn't mind because his love has no limits. How can you know for sure? Revisit that manger in Bethlehem. Who is it lying there so meek and mild? That's your Savior and mine—God in the flesh. Visit that cross pounded into the ground of a hill called Golgotha. Who is it there? That's your substitute bleeding and praying and dying for you to take away all your sins. That's how committed the Lord is to you and me. That's how faithful he is in keeping his promises. This is

why I, Zechariah, couldn't help but sing out this song because I saw all that God had set in motion...

**68 "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.
69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
71 salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
72 to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,
73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.**

What has the Lord done? He has remembered. He has remembered his covenant...his covenant oath that he swore to Abraham...another old man who waited so long to see God's promises come true. And you know what? Abraham didn't live to see them all fulfilled in his lifetime just I didn't live to see them all fulfilled in my lifetime either. And you know what? You probably won't to see them all fulfilled in your lifetime either. But one day you will see how God has answered all your prayers for your eternal good. One day you will see clearly how God has loved you dearly. And right now, it's enough to know that Jesus Christ has come and set you free to live your life serving God without fear all the days of your life however many or few they might be until he calls you home to heaven. And remember that when you get to the point where you're about to give up...that might just be the time God shows to help. Friends, God has not ever forgotten you, even when it sometimes feels like it. Amen.