What was missing in Zechariah's response that you would expect when receiving the answer to your prayers in such a magnificent fashion?

We don't have to allow our own disappointments to overwhelm our hope.

3. Be Present with God

If we draw near to God we will find the reason for hope. Knowing the love and faithfulness of God helps us to conquer our doubts and overcome hopelessness. But we need to spend time in God's presence for that to happen. Here are three step to take.

- Slow down- this Christmas don't neglect time for God. The story of Jesus' birth is familiar but take time to reflect on the significance this year. *What facts about Christ's appearing fill you with wonder?*
- Make Room – for the supernatural. *What are some of the elements of the Christmas story that have no natural explanation. Things that reflect the supernatural power of God?*
- *Draw Near- we are invited into the throne room of the King. Jesus' birth was the expression of God's love and faithfulness. Let's accept the invitations with gratitude and give God thanks and praise.*

WRAP-UP

The first week of Advent focuses on hope and encourages us to slow down, make room for wonder, and draw closer to God amid the busyness of Christmas. Through the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, we are reminded that God has not forgotten us, even when prayers seem unanswered and circumstances feel impossible. Their story teaches us to trust in God's faithfulness, overcome doubt, and remain hopeful while waiting on His timing. This Christmas, we are encouraged to spend intentional time in God's presence, reflect on the miracle of Jesus' birth, recognize His supernatural power, and respond with gratitude, worship, and praise.

MEMORY VERSE

23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. – Hebrews 10:23 NIV

***Challenge** – Put time on your calendar to draw near to God and linger in His presence.*

Advent - Hope
Those Who Draw Near– Week 1

INTRODUCTION

This week we begin the season of Advent- the 4 weeks leading up to Christmas. Advent marks a time of waiting – in Luke's Gospel, all Israel was waiting for the arrival of the Messiah, and we are waiting too. Waiting for the return of Jesus to the earth to make all things new. But how do we wait well? Christmas can easily become filled with noise, hurry and even chaos as we struggle to buy all the gifts, send the Christmas greetings, attend all the gatherings and performances that we hope will yield beautiful memories. What if instead we pause, slow down and make room for wonder. What if we draw near to God this Christmas?

Ice Breaker

When are you most likely to finish your Christmas "to do" list: Early in December (or even before), somewhere around mid-month, or midnight or later on Christmas eve?

Key Passage

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. 63 He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." 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. Luke 1:57-66 NIV

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Childless but Not Forgotten

Before Luke introduces Mary and Joseph into our Christmas narrative, we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth. We are told that both have a priestly

lineage, that they are righteous in God's sight and blameless. Yet they had no children and they were very old.

> *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. – Luke 1:5-7 NIV*

It was considered a reproach and a disgrace for a woman in ancient times to not bear children. Elizabeth experienced this shame, feeling reproach from the people.

Have you experienced circumstances that made you feel forgotten by God? Did it cause you to feel distant from Him or were you able to draw near despite those circumstances?

In the first week of Advent the theme is hope. When we seek God for relief from difficult circumstances in our lives there is a battle to hold on to hope. One word for hope in the bible is Qavah (*Hebrew*) and it refers to waiting in tension, or a heightened state of expectation. But holding something in tension can be wearing.

> *23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. – Hebrews 10:23 NIV*

What are some of the things that help you hold on to hope over a long period of waiting? When have you experienced God's faithfulness in your life?

God's timing is perfect but not always as swift and we'd like. Even as we endure a long wait to see God move, we are encouraged to hold onto our hope because God is faithful.

2. Overcoming Unbelief

This was not a unique story. There were others in the bible who grew old without having children. Abraham and Sarah were also an elderly childless couple.

> *11 Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ... 13 Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' 14 Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son." – Genesis 18:11, 13-14 NIV*

Like Saraah, we may become convinced that our circumstance will never change. Our default in times like this often begins in unbelief.

Has there been a time when you had to believe God for "the impossible"? Are you still holding on to hope for the impossible?

> *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. – Luke 1:11-13 NIV*

The Lord Himself told Abrahama and Sarah that they would have a son, yet they still struggled with unbelief. But God was able to do the impossible and use Abraham and Sarah to begin the line from which Jesus, the Messiah would be born.

In what ways was the story of John the Baptist's birth an echo of what God had done for Abraham and Sarah?

> *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." 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." – Luke 1:14-18 NIV*

When Gabriel told Zechariah about the vision of John's life, he referenced several Old Testament prophecies. Malachi 4:5–6 , Malachi 3:1 & Isaiah 40:3. John would be a forerunner of the Messiah, in the spirit and power of Elijah, turning the hearts of the people back to God and family. While it is understandable that Zechariah had difficulty accepting what he was hearing, there were still consequences for his unbelief.

> *19 The angel said to him, "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." – Luke 1:19-20 NIV*

What was Zechariah's first response to the good news" that God sent?