

December 4, 2016

The Faces of Christmas  
*Facing Dead Hopes*  
Luke 1:5-13

**Opening words:** Today, I continue my eight-part sermon series, *The Faces of Christmas*. We are looking at the different faces in the story of Christmas. They were like us in many ways. Like us, their lives were far from perfect. They faced challenges, the same challenges we face today. In the past 2,000 years, our world has changed a great deal when it comes to transportation, communication and electronics, but the human condition remains the same. If you were with us last week then you will remember we looked at the most famous stepfather in history, Joseph. Today, we look at a couple who had a fertility problem - Elizabeth and Zechariah.

Within the pages of the Old Testament was another couple with a fertility problem - Abraham and Sarah. The couples were similar in several ways. Both couples were godly people. Both couples were considered old, whatever that means. Both couples conceived in a miraculous way. Both couples welcomed a son into the world. Abraham and Sarah welcomed Isaac. Zachariah and Elizabeth welcomed John. Both sons were major players in God's plan of salvation for the world. These similarities can't be an accident. It was all part of the divine plan. Our Gospel reading for today is Luke 1:5-13. Let me call this message *Facing Dead Hopes*.

**Luke 1:5-13** 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. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. <sup>7</sup> But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. <sup>8</sup> Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. <sup>11</sup> Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup> 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.

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Inspirational author Shannon Alder once said, "*Fear is the glue that keeps you stuck. Faith is the solvent that sets you free.*" I like that quote. If you like that quote, say, **"Amen!"**

Did you know the Ohltown United Methodist Church is the last surviving original building in Ohltown, Ohio? I find that fun fact interesting. Do you know the history of Ohltown? The town was founded by a man named Michael Ohl (1784 -1857). He and his wife Eva (Moyers) Ohl (1786 - 1860) were married in 1838. In time, they had eight children. Michael built a saw & grist mill in 1844 on the banks of the Meander Creek, operated a hotel, and was the first postmaster of the post office that ran from 1841 - 1902. The first church in Ohltown was built in 1838. The first school was built in 1857. The first bank came in 1868. Historians tell us, during the 1880's the town also had about 30 houses, a blacksmith shop, two stores, a newer grist mill, and a train station on the Niles & New Lisbon Railroad. Many of the local residents worked in coal mines or at the Meander Iron Furnace. I find that to be fascinating. At one time, Ohltown was quite a place with a bright future. That all changed during the 1920s. That was the decade the Meander Creek was dammed and the community of Ohltown was flooded. I have been told by many, some of the original buildings of Ohltown still remain under the water of the Meander Reservoir, which supplies many in this area with water.

The visual of those submerged buildings has always fascinated me. I have often wondered how those Ohltown residents felt on the day they were told their community had no future. With no future, everything changed. There was no need to paint your house. There was no need to repair the roads. There was no need to elect municipal officials. There was no need to do any of those things, because they had no future. They were an entire community who were living with dead hopes. Can I state the obvious? The community of Ohltown, Ohio is gone, but many still live there. Do you know of anyone who has no future? They aren't just negative people. They are living with dead hopes. If you know of someone living with dead hopes, say, "**Amen!**"

Several years ago, I completed a six-year term on one of our local non-profit boards. I served as the president of that board during my last two years. We met once a month to discuss the challenges and opportunities of our organization. The best part of that board was the people. Each one was a fine person. They came from various parts of this community. Each one had a passion for our purpose. Through the years, I got to know each one. I had a good relationship with each one, except one person. Her body language told me she didn't care for me. At first, I thought I was intimidating her with my good looks ☺. Over time, I discovered the real reason. She didn't like me because I was a minister. I don't want to sound critical, but I guess I am. She didn't have a spiritual bone in her body. Let me say it bluntly. She was mad at God. I will be honest with you. If you look at the world through faithless unspiritual eyes, it is easy to be mad at God. The news is filled with major worldwide problems where innocent people are suffering. This young businesswoman lived somewhere in the county, but she was really living in submerged Ohltown, Ohio, where there is no hope for a bright future. Her faithless soul prevented her from seeing the truth. It isn't over until God says it is

over. Do you know anyone who is living with dead hopes? If someone pops into your mind, say, **"Amen!"** With this in mind, let us look at this morning's Gospel lesson. We find ourselves today in the first chapter of Luke. The main character in the story is Zechariah. He was married to a woman named Elizabeth. They were from the priestly line of Aaron. Verse six tells us they were upright in the sight of God, observing all the rules and regulations. The only scar on their perfect lives was their barrenness. I am comfortable making this next statement: They had tried every modern first century way to conceive, but the cradle was still empty. In our time, many are jealous of those who have no children. In their time, the childless were pitied. Barrenness was not just disappointing, it was devastating. Children were seen as a blessing. The more children you had, the greater the blessings. The fewer children you had, the fewer the blessings. Zechariah and Elizabeth had no children, so they had no blessings. Everyone wondered what they had done wrong. They themselves wondered what they had done wrong. Why had God turned his back on them? They were living with dead hopes. Their hopes of a happy, healthy child were dead. But this is a Bible story, and in the Bible it isn't over until God says it is over.

According to the text, the lot fell on Zechariah to burn incense at the temple. It wasn't just an honor. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity. The number of men in that line of David was massive. Zechariah knew it was going to be a special day, but he had no clue how special. He didn't just practice an ancient ritual, he experienced the divine. An angel told him his life was about to change for the positive. His prayers and the prayer of his wife had not fallen on deaf ears. They were going to become parents at their advanced age. They were going to have a son and they were not to name the boy after his father, Zechariah. They were to name him John. The name John is significant because it means "the Lord is gracious." The angel did not lie. One year later, their cradle held a son. In time, that son grew up to be the one who would announce the coming of the long awaited Messiah, Jesus.

So what does the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth teach us? How does this story help us to live out the faith? The answer is simple. The story reminds us of the great value of faith. God will act in his time and his way. God is not accountable to us. That is painful to hear because we are so impatient and selfish. You know the truth. The faithful get frustrated with God. Zechariah and Elizabeth must have wondered why their son didn't come sooner. The faithless get mad at God. How many people do you know who are mad at God? This is the real question: How far do you trust God? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Last night, I flew in from Colorado Springs. I was gone for a few days but it wasn't a true vacation. I told you last week my sister, Janet, has terminal cancer. The sister I knew physically is gone. She doesn't look like herself. If I didn't know it was her, I

wouldn't recognize her. She wore a hat to cover her balding head from all the chemo. After losing twenty-five pounds, her body is frail and weak. Her mind is confused from a recent stroke. Her voice is nearly gone. When I saw her for the first time, I was filled with emotions, which quickly passed. My other sister, Susan, and I just sat and talked to her. We asked some basic questions. We got caught up on our lives and remembered our time with our departed parents. No one mentioned the future, because my sister has no future. In many ways, it was a sad gathering, but there was something nice about it. Being there and traveling all those miles was the right thing to do. It was just so genuine. When we sat down and ate our first meal together, we held hands and I prayed. My words were filled with the core values of my family; family and Jesus. I don't want to sound like a nut, but I felt a divine peace. We were completely dependent on God and I felt the Holy Spirit wash through us. I thought I was the only one to feel it, but the next day my healthy sister said, "Pray at dinner again tonight. I want to feel that again." It was one of the rare times in my life I didn't question the depth of my faith. Each one of us had experienced God and we knew everything was going to be fine. Don't get me wrong. I don't want my sister to die, but she is dying. I don't like it, but her death is all part of the divine plan.

As we come to the Communion table, let me say this clearly. The faith is not about getting what you want. The faith is about trusting God. How far do you trust God? Shannon Alder once said, *"Fear is the glue that keeps you stuck. Faith is the solvent that sets you free."* And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"