

Christmas With Jesus

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I want to begin by showing you this picture (see online sermon to view the picture) from the artist Banksy. It's called *Christ with Shopping Bags*.

This season, Christmastime, is what Christians call "Advent." The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus* meaning "arrival." Specifically, this is in reference to the arrival, the advent, of God in human history, in the person of Jesus. This is what Christians celebrate, which right away brings connotations that are different than our culture's view of Christmas, right?

And this is why I love the Banksy picture—because it shows *visually* the incompatibility between a Christian perspective of Christmas (Advent) and the world's version of Christmas. It's just *weird* to put shopping bags with candy canes and a Mickey Mouse and have pink ribbons on the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross, isn't it? Banksy is doing that on purpose. He's doing that to showcase how Christian Christmas (Advent) and secular Christmas, if not at total odds with one another, DO have distinct differences.

And while there are many differences, one difference that I want to talk about today (that I think Luke 1 deals with) revolves around this question: "What do I do when I feel disappointment and darkness in life?"

Here's the thing with secular Christmas: *it doesn't acknowledge that the world is full of darkness and disappointment*. Skating right past the hardships of everyday life, secular Christmas would have us believe that life is all hams, yams, and Christmas jams! And if it does happen to acknowledge that life is hard, its solution is found wanting. Its only *salvation* is forgetfulness and, I don't know, shopping + lights. And if we have any self-awareness, we know *that's not enough*.

Advent, on the other hand, begins acknowledging that in life there *is* darkness and disappointment. Advent *starts* with recognizing that beneath the veneer of Christmas cheer, the reality of human bondage to sin lurks. Underneath the lights and cookies, we have our anxieties and loneliness, we have marriage issues, we have our addictions, our country has racial tensions, internally we have anger, greed, lust, and selfishness. But while admitting that life is dark and full of disappointment, Advent ultimately points to the redemption and restoration of this world through the coming of Jesus.

Now, I'm no Grinch. That's not why I begin here. I begin here because Advent does. Because Luke does. Luke chapter 1 actually begins *in the darkness*. What I want to do today is walk us through the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth in Luke 1 to see if we can glean anything from God's Word that responds to that question: "What do I do when everything around me *seems* merry and bright, but deep down everything feels disappointing or dark?"

Here's how Luke begins: After a brief introduction, Luke takes us into the dark. He writes,

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. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.
(Luke 1:5-7)

So we begin with Zechariah living a normal life, being a priest, living righteously, walking blamelessly, and interceding between God and God's people, Israel. And while that's a respectable job, that's about all Zechariah and Elizabeth have got going for them. Did you notice that for Zechariah and Elizabeth they're "in the time of Herod?" What does that mean? It meant:

- **Corrupt rulers.** Herod himself was so concerned with his own wealth, power, authority, and well-being that he killed anyone who threatened him, including at least three of his own sons and one of his wives. People in his day even had a saying: "It's better to be Herod's pig (*hus*) than to be Herod's son (*huios*)."
- **Political turmoil.** Revolt after revolt had taken place by people against Rome, which were, according to one historian, "mercilessly crushed" time and time again.
- **A pluralistic sinful culture.** There weren't many things you *couldn't* do in this day and age. According to historian Larry Hurtado, in the Greco-Roman world you could participate in "infant exposure," also known as discarding unwanted children on a trash-heap site to either die or be collected by someone else for slavery (and many times it was sex trafficking). On top of that, the Romans engaged in gladiatorial shows where people would watch others fight dressed in foreign garb so as to distance themselves from the action and then die violently. And for one more to boot, there was the all-too common practice of pederasty — sexual activity occurring between a man and a young boy. It was as perverse a culture as you could imagine — and you had to be tolerant in the face of it all!
- **Pagan marketing.** Everywhere you looked, a way of life contrary to the ways of God were thrown in your face. Rome's branding was suffocating! Pagan temples galore, soldiers milling around, the Roman shield and crest plastered in public places, statues of gods and goddesses put up everywhere—it was endless.
- **Internal factions.** And because of all this, you had Jews with dissensions within their own ranks! Everyone was trying to figure out the best response to all of the above. Some opted for compromise (Sadducees), some were rigorously *uncompromising* and they looked down upon their kin (Pharisees), some were militant (Zealots), and some just got out of dodge (Essenes).

Sound familiar? But that's not all for Zechariah and his wife. Did you notice how Zechariah and Elizabeth are "without child"? The text says, "But they were childless..." This had to have been heartbreaking for the couple. They had been praying and praying and never once had the blessing of a son or a daughter. Not only was this personally disquieting, but it was also socially taboo. "Oh, you don't have kids? You must have some deep dark secret that God is punishing you for." Elizabeth even later says that she experienced "reproach" from her social circles because of her barrenness.

But that's also not all. Not only were they "in the days of Herod" and childless, they were also both "very old." What I'm not doing here is saying that their old age itself is cause for darkness. What I want to point out here is that these two had been serving God faithfully their whole lives and never once had they seen God's blessing or favor. Israel hadn't heard a word from God for 400 years—years and years of being "righteous in the sight of God" and "observing all the Lord's commands," and for what?

You can imagine the war going on in their minds throughout all this, right? "What's the point of all this religious ritual if God's not going to come through? What's the point if He isn't going to hold fast to his promises? Have we believed a lie?" I also wonder if, in this time, Zechariah thought of his name's meaning in Hebrew—"the Lord remembers"—and quickly dismissed it for the simple fact that despite God being all-knowing and all-powerful He seemed to have laid aside His divine attribute of faithfulness and replaced it with forgetfulness. "The Lord remembers?" he might have questioned. "More like the Lord has better things to do than to think of me and Israel."

You can *feel* the darkness, can't you?

But the story doesn't end there. Perhaps a glimmer of light appears with what comes next. Luke continues, "Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense" (Luke 1:8-9). This was a once in a lifetime opportunity for Zechariah. There were 18,000 priests in Israel and only 14 priests per year got this honor. This means that in 10 years, only 140 priests were chosen to do this. And it just so happened that on this day in history, Zechariah was chosen by lot.

And, as the story goes, as Zechariah is burning incense, he is approached by the angel Gabriel (maybe that light is getting even brighter!). Here's what the angel says: "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. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord..." (Luke 1:13-15). Put yourself in his position and imagine what this must have been like. "A word from God!? My personal longings for a child fulfilled!? Our long-awaited hope to come at last?? And my SON gets to be a part of it!?"

You'd think that Zechariah's response would be one of jubilation, right? Think again. Here's what we read: "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 1:18). Instead of excited anticipation, instead of patient waiting, Zechariah doubts. He does not think it possible. He says, "What are you talking about? I'm an old man! My wife is old; she's well along in years."

Gabriel isn't about to let anything stand in the way of God fulfilling his plans and he's not going to allow Zechariah to live with his cynical, disbelieving heart, either. Gabriel responds. He says, "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. 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).

After being made mute and deaf, and after finishing his priestly duties, Zechariah returns home. You can imagine what that must have been like, right? The honor of a lifetime and he disappoints. A wife to care for through her pregnancy and he can't talk or hear anything. What would he have been feeling? Despair? Regret? Was he disappointed in himself?

Shortly after his return home, Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, conceived. Now, fast forward nine months and our story picks back up. Zechariah has learned that his wife Elizabeth has a family member, Mary, who is going to birth the Messiah! And finally after nine months, Elizabeth gave birth to a boy. The people gathered around, wondering what to name him. They wanted to name him *after* Zechariah, but Elizabeth said "NO! Gabriel told us to name him John!" So they went and asked Zechariah. And the text says, "Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John.' Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God" (Luke 1:62-64).

I love that story. I love how raw and real it is. And I love it even more because of what we can glean from it for our own lives as we think about answering that original question: "What do I do when I feel disappointment and darkness in life?" I see three takeaways for us:

1. God calls us to live as if in the light, not in the darkness.

In this story we saw Zechariah respond in two distinct ways. At first, he nails this. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were righteous before God and they walked blamelessly with the Lord. Which is easier said than done. I'm reminded at this point of *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis depicts two demons: one an uncle (Screwtape) and the other his nephew (Wormwood), writing letters back and forth to one another. Screwtape, the uncle demon, is trying to help Wormwood tempt the human he is responsible for tempting. In one of the exchanges, Screwtape is talking about how humans go through highs and lows in life. Ups and downs. Screwtape tells his nephew Wormwood that he has to be careful in tempting this human because for the Enemy (i.e., God), tough moments, moments of darkness, can be one of the MOST impactful experiences in a person's relationship with God. Why? Because it's in those moments of darkness where spiritual resolve is either lost or won. He warns his nephew, saying this: "Be not deceived, Wormwood, our cause is never more in jeopardy than when a human, no longer desiring but still intending to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe in which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."

Here's the application, a question: What is your response to times of cultural decay, personal turmoil, and spiritual dryness? Is it faithfulness to God? Is it walking blamelessly? Or is it something else? Raising your fist at God and the world? Taking others down into the pit with you? Resorting to coping mechanisms—eating, shopping, entertainment, etc? I love this about Zechariah and Elizabeth. What an example! They remained righteous and walked blamelessly before God despite living in the time of Herod, despite being childless, and despite being advanced in age. That's the first way we see Zechariah and Elizabeth respond. The other way they respond isn't so commendable.

We saw in our story that in the midst of his darkness, Zechariah succumbed to disbelief. And for his doubt he was disciplined. But what I think is worth pointing out is not the doubt in and of itself, it's the spirit within which doubt is done.

I wonder if in the middle of being "in the time of Herod" with personal anguish and no word from God for years and years, it was easy for him to slip into cynical disbelief that God COULD actually come through or that God WOULD come through. Zechariah perhaps succumbed here to what Jurgen Moltmann describes in his book *The Ethics of Hope* when he writes, "When we expect that everything will stay the way it is, we often consciously or unconsciously ensure that it does."

Here again is another application point: in the midst of our waiting for the light to dawn in the darkness, we wind up asking at some point or another, "What if the light I'm waiting for never comes? What if I'm stuck with this darkness for the rest of my life?" What happens is that as people go through hardships in life, it tends to make people harder. People become more jaded, more bitter. Eventually, all the life is taken out of them. And the question, "What if the thing light I'm waiting for just never comes?" turns into a simple statement of fatalism: "The light I'm waiting for will *never* come."

Of course, there's an alternative to this as well. Sometimes people come out of the other side of hardship and dark moments, transformed by it into something beautiful. Not embittered and jaded, but joyful and loving and more sensitive to life's beauty and wonder. How do we become this second kind of person instead of the first? Well, that comes from realizing point number two.

2. God meets us IN the darkness.

God shows up for Zechariah in our passage and here's what you need to know: that just as God meets Zechariah "in the days of Herod," in the midst of personal pain, and while in a spiritual desert, God will meet you in your moments of darkness, too. Trust me. I've been there. I know what it's like to wake and

feel the longings of the heart unfulfilled. I know that every day brings with it new pains and hurts. But what I also know is that God meets us in the dark night.

I love this picture of *The Crucifixion* by Francisco de Zurbarán (see online sermon to view the picture) because I think it showcases exactly what I mean. Here we have Jesus on the cross. But notice that's ALL that's depicted. No soldiers. No mockers. No Mary. No disciples. Just Jesus on the cross in the middle of a completely black background. What Francisco is showing us here is that Christ *knows* darkness. When He went to the cross, He went to the deepest, darkest place.

Here's the application on this one: when you're in the dark and lonely place, when you look at life and you're disappointed, when you're deathly afraid that that longings of your heart will be left unfulfilled—bring it to God. He isn't just Mighty God and Prince of Peace; He is also Wonderful Counselor. He knows what you feel and He's with you all the way through it.

3. God triumphs over the darkness.

You need to know that while God's work is cosmic in its implications, it isn't to the neglect of you and me personally. And that's what we see in this text. God has big plans to redeem and restore the world. But God doesn't just come through for His people in general (by bringing the Messiah), He shows up for His people in particular (as we see here with Zechariah and Elizabeth). He does the same for you and me. And you need to know that God remembers and is faithful to keep His promises. What He has promised WILL come to pass. You can take that to the bank.

Here's why. Remember how Zechariah's story ended with him *praising* God? Well, we didn't go super in depth initially, but I want to dig a little deeper into his praise as we end. Here's what he says: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them" (Luke 1:68). He's speaking here of Jesus.

He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (Luke 1:69-75).

Did you notice how Zechariah speaks in *past tense*. God "*has come*" to his people, He has "*redeemed*" them, He has "*raised up*" a horn of salvation. None of these things have literally happened yet. Jesus has yet to be born. The cross with its redemption and salvation are still some 33 years away. And yet, Zechariah is so sure and certain of God's Word that *even though these things have not come to pass, because he knows who God is it doesn't really matter—it's as if it's as good as having already happened.*

He's not even done. Here's why he can use the past tense—he continues saying that all of this is "because of the tender mercy of our God by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace" (Luke 1:78-79).

No more darkness. No more disappointment. Advent may begin in the darkness, but it doesn't end there. Because of the tender mercy of our God, there is hope, there is peace, there is joy. And it's found in Jesus.

And this is where the gospel comes in. Perhaps because of either cultural, personal, or spiritual darkness, you're asking the question: "What do I do when I feel this disappointment and darkness in life?" And no matter how hard you look, you can't find an answer.

Might I humbly suggest, that the answer isn't in any program, position, prize, or possession. It's found in a *person*.

Listen closely—Jesus entered into the time of Herod then and he's present in this time now. He knows your barrenness. He knows what it's like to desire and be left unfulfilled. On the cross, stripped of His clothing, devoid of the comfort of friends and family, bleeding and broken, He cried out, "I thirst!" And Jesus knows what it's like to face a spiritually dry place—on the cross, Jesus exclaimed, "Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani," meaning "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!?"

Jesus went to the deepest darkest pit. But he didn't stay there. He rose from the grave. And as He rises, He pulls by the hand out from that same grave all those who put their faith in Him! For, "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4-5).

I love what St. Augustine recognizes. He says this: "As long as we are in this life, it is night for us..." There is darkness. No doubt. But it doesn't end there. He continues: "By Christ's descent into the night, Christ took flesh from this world and lit up the night for us."