

“When the Time is Right”

Luke 1:5-25

12.05.21

Introduction

If you pay attention when watching a movie or reading a book, there are usually at least two plots. The first is the main plot, and the second is the sub plot. The main plot is concerned with the overall framework of the story, and the sub plot unpacks the peripheral parts and ties them into the whole.

So, for an example, one of my favorite stories during the Christmas season is *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. The main plot focuses on Ebenezer Scrooge and the personal transformation he experiences on Christmas Eve.

The subplot would include parts like Tiny Tim and his various health problems. During his visitation from the Ghost of Christmas Future, Scrooge learns that if he is not generous and charitable that Tiny Tim will not survive. Although Tiny Tim has a fairly marginal role in the story, his circumstances become a game changer for Scrooge.

For me, thinking in terms of main plot and subplot is the best way to understand God’s will. God has this overarching plan to make all things new and it includes all of creation. This is the main plot.

Then, there are our individual lives. We are born in specific places and times, with various gifts, obstacles, and opportunities. This is the subplot. Therefore, what God wants to accomplish in our individual lives is directly related to what God wants to accomplish within the bigger picture.

Digging Deeper

There’s probably not a better story in all the Bible that illustrates this point than the birth of John the Baptizer. According to Luke, both of John’s parents are up in years. In the ancient world, life expectancy was much shorter, so one scholar speculates that they were probably in their sixties at the time that this story is taking place.

Zechariah, John’s father, was a priest. Back in those days, being a priest wasn’t a vocation one chose; rather, it was a role that one was born into. In a patriarchal culture, it was expected for everyone to reproduce, but especially someone like Zechariah. It was important for him to have a son who could carry out the priestly duties for the people of Israel.

Unfortunately, it was automatically assumed that problems of infertility were a woman’s problem. More specifically, people in the ancient world did not consider infertility to be a biological problem as much as it was a spiritual one. Therefore, the story implies that Elizabeth had done something wrong in God’s eyes and she was paying the price.

In a culture where a woman's primary purpose was to birth children, especially male children, it is difficult to imagine the kind of shame that Elizabeth must have felt. Then one night, an angel came and appeared to Zechariah while he was carrying out his priestly duties in the Temple. The news was that he and his wife were going to have a son, and his name would be John.

Of course, the angel goes on to tell Zechariah all the great things John will do. John will prepare the way for Jesus, the Messiah. He will turn Israel back so that they will listen to God's voice.

As I reflect on this story, it seems that God did not just want Zechariah and Elizabeth to have a baby—God wanted them to have a John. And God did not simply want John to have two biological parents—God wanted him to have a Zechariah and Elizabeth who would shape his life and help him grow to be a man of God.

The subplot is that two righteous, God-fearing people really want to have a baby. The main plot is that God wants to prepare the way for the birth of the Messiah. When the timing was right, the two events aligned perfectly in God's plan.

Reflection

I've got a confession to make: these kinds of sermons are challenging for me. Primarily because from my experience, most of us are a lot more interested in the subplot than the main plot. In other words, it seems we spend a lot more time thinking about what we want God to do for us than being concerned with how our individuals lives fit into God's bigger plan. As a result, we often view God kind of like our personal servant; we ask God for something and then we get bent out of shape when we don't get *what* we want *when* we want it.

Don't get me wrong—God understands our human emotions. God does not turn a blind eye to our feelings of disappointment or our heart's desires. But sometimes we have to wait for the right timing. And sometimes we also have to come to terms with the fact that what we want is not always a part of God's bigger plan.

From what I gather as I read this story, Elizabeth was not preoccupied with getting what she wanted. She wasn't scorned. She was steadfast.

Luke introduces the elderly couple by describing them as "righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly" (Luke 1:6, NIV). Later, when Elizabeth learns that she is with child, she says, "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people" (Luke 1:25, NIV). And when Mary comes to Elizabeth and tells her that she is pregnant, Luke describes Elizabeth as a Spirit filled woman of God (Luke 1:41).

Based on Zechariah's response in the Temple, it would seem that the elderly couple had probably accepted the fact that they will never be parents.¹ I honestly cannot imagine how painful that would be. Yet, Elizabeth continued trusting in God. Not necessarily trusting that God would eventually give her what she wanted; instead, it appears that Elizabeth trusted that God had a different plan for her life.

There's this verse in Psalms that says, "Take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4, NIV). If we're not careful, we might think this verse means that God is going to give us whatever we want; but if we read carefully, it begins with "Take delight in the Lord..."

That's what we see happening in the story of Elizabeth. She is delighting in the Lord. And because she is delighting in the Lord, she ultimately wants what God wants more than anything else.

Unfortunately, we have gotten to a place where a lot of Christians think that prayer is primarily asking God for the things we want—asking God to change circumstances. When the purpose of prayer is actually to help us want the same things as God—prayer is ultimately not about God changing things—prayer is about God changing us.

Jesus taught us this through his prayer life. In what we traditionally call the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (ref). And in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed on the night he was arrested, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42, NIV). Like Elizabeth, Jesus is more concerned with the main plot than the subplot.

Invitation

I can't help but think of a song by Garth Brooks called "Unanswered Prayers." The essence of the song is that the singer is able to look back on his life and see how differently everything would have gone had God answered the prayers of his youth. He is grateful that God did not answer some of his prayers.

I think this happens to all of us at different times. I've heard stories about individuals who really wanted a position in a certain firm, but they never got hired. They felt like a failure. They felt incompetent. In time, however, they learned that the organization was corrupt and that those involved were facing major legal ramifications.

¹ Gabriel says that God is answering their prayer. It is not clear whether Zechariah's prayer was for the redemption of the nation, or whether it was for a child. If both, God answers both prayers with one solution: the birth of a son. If Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed for a child, it is possible that the prayer that Gabriel mentions is from decades earlier. God has not forgotten!

I've also heard of stories similar to Zechariah and Elizabeth where a couple was unable to have children. It was heartbreaking for them, but eventually a need arose for child in their family to be adopted.

Sometimes when we pray the answer is yes. Sometimes when we pray the answer is that what we want is ultimately not a part of God's bigger plan. Sometimes when we pray the answer is that God will work it out when the time is right.

How are you managing your unanswered prayers? Are you holding God in contempt? Or are you living faithfully like Elizabeth, trusting that whatever happens, your life is in God's hands?

The invitation today is ultimately to delight yourself in the Lord. God might not give you what you want, but if you are open and receptive to God's bigger plan, God will change your heart's desires.

Reference Tools

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Fitzmyer, Joseph. *The Gospel According to Luke I-X*. 1981. New York: Doubleday.

Keener, Craig. *Bible Background Commentary*. 1994. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Nickle, Keith. *Preaching Luke*. 2000. Louisville: John Knox Press.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What's your favorite Christmas story (book or movie)?
2. As you reflect on this week's message, what one thought stands out as being particularly helpful, insightful, or difficult to grasp?
3. How do you manage your disappointments when the answer to your prayer is "no" or "wait"?
4. How do you feel about the statement that the purpose of prayer is ultimately not about God changing our circumstances but God changing us?

5. How have you witnessed God's grace recently?

6. How can we pray for you?