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Advent 3, Luke 1  
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Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah only appear in Luke's version of the birth of Jesus, yet, for me, they are the quintessential Advent story. They are the ones who for years have been watching and waiting to have a child. They are now too old - far beyond the years where pregnancy was a realistic possibility. But their yearning had not subsided, and then, they get pregnant. They get a chance to experience their dream being born. To see the miracle of God working in their life.

Yet this story isn't about miracles. That's not why Luke includes Elizabeth and Zechariah, and their child, the one who will become John the Baptist, in the nativity story. Luke's got a big enough miracle with the whole virgin birth thing. For Luke, this vignette is all about John the Baptist. At the time of adult Jesus' ministry, John the Baptist was also ministering in the same area - his message was similar, miracles were along the same lines, he also is executed by the state. Luke wanted to show that John the Baptist was not a competitor of Jesus, but a supporter of Jesus, from the very beginning. People don't have to choose to follow John or Jesus, because John followed Jesus. From the very first time they met in utero.

But for me, this vignette is about Elizabeth and Zechariah. And all those that have gone before them and come after them. Those who are waiting and watching for God to be born in their lives. The coming of Jesus, the coming of the Messiah, is God's response to humanity's desire to experience him, to know him more deeply, to know that God is with them. That they are not alone. That their God hears them and cares about them. And our repeating this story every year - our retelling of how Mary and Joseph made their way to the stable and the angels came and the shepherds came and the wise men - it is all designed to remind us that God came, the God comes among us, and to stop and behold God's presence with us is the greatest gift we can give ourselves or anyone else this season.

And Elizabeth and Zechariah know what it's like to wait, to watch, to not see or feel God with them. To be infertile in that society was disgraceful. Many descendents were a blessing from God. None meant that your line would die with you. Beyond the societal disgrace, Elizabeth and Zechariah wanted children and the absence of a child in the life grieved them deeply. They felt the loss every time they saw a family together. They felt the loss when they imagined their future and there was no child in it. Countless prayers for a child, just one, were whispered from their lips. Yet nothing. Disappointment, anger, frustration - you name it, they felt it. But they moved forward in faith. To the temple, they went, even when they were past their childbearing years. And they prayed, for what at that point, we don't know. Their waiting and watching, no doubt, taking on a new form when realistic possibility of children was gone. They watched and waited for God to show up in some way, somehow.

A few years ago Radiolab, an NPR program, told a story about the watching and waiting that went on in a nursing home in Dusseldorf Germany. Those of you who have spent much time in nursing homes know that many units for those with Alzheimers, dementia, or significant memory loss are often on locked units. That's because these residents have a tendency to wander since they are not living in the present time. They may think that they are children again and they need to be home before their parents get worried about them. Or they may think they need to go to work wherever they worked 50 years ago. In this nursing home in Germany though they didn't want to lockdown the residents, but no matter how vigilant they were, every few months, one of their residents would walk out the front door, down the street, in whatever direction they thought would get them where they thought they needed to be. Such escapes would set off a police search as they knew they had a vulnerable adult lost in the city. The staff wanted to do something proactive about this serious safety issue.

Someone spoke up with an idea, ridiculous at first, but they thought they'd try it. They put a bus stop in front of the home, equipped with a sign and a bench, so that the first thing residents would see when they walked out the door to head somewhere was that bus stop sign. Bus stops are places where you wait for a bus to take you where you want to

go, they figured residents would remember, and they would wait there. And it worked. Whenever a resident would be found missing, the staff would look out the window and see them there, sitting on the bench, waiting for the bus to come. And the bus never came, but a staff person would go out and sit with them on the bench. They wouldn't try to convince them that they weren't twelve and they didn't need to be home before supper or they would be punished by their parents. They wouldn't try to convince them that they didn't need to go to the job they had gone to for forty years. They would sit with them, make small talk, until they were less concerned about where they thought they had to be, and willing instead to move in a different direction, back to their home.

Advent is a season of waiting, and some of us are in a place in our lives, where we are waiting at that bus stop. Waiting to get to where we think we are supposed to be. Maybe we are confused. Maybe we aren't. Maybe we are at a real bus stop and it is going to take us somewhere. Maybe we just don't know. And Christmas, the coming of Christ, reminds us that God comes and sits on that bench with us. Listens to us worry about the places we long to be and the people we long to be with. Sits with us as we wonder where we are going and why we are going there. Sits on that bench. God incarnate. God with us. Until we are ready to move. Whether it's onto the bus that comes or whether it's back to the life that we are in now. God is with us.

For Elizabeth and Zechariah, as they sat at that bus stop, the bus came, their deepest longing was answered in the way that they wanted it to be, at least in that moment. John the Baptist of course is later beheaded; I'm sure neither dreamed that for their child. But they saw God's blessings in the way they so prayed for. That doesn't happen all the time. But listen to Elizabeth's words in the gospel reading. It is not her own pregnancy that she is rejoicing. It is the presence of God's gift in Mary that she rejoices at the presence of. It is in her arrival that she sees as a sign that God is near and blessing her. Because Elizabeth, even though she has her dream child inside her, is still sitting on that bench, nervously anticipating what might happen as these last three months of her pregnancy pass - will the child be healthy, will she be a good mother, what will happen? And Mary, God in Mary, is there to sit with her. In her waiting, God is near.

In our waiting, God is near. This Advent season, let us not be so occupied looking down the road for what might come or might never come to see God who is right here next to us.