I BELIEVE. NEVERTHELESS!

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What should you do when God seems silent and long-held prayers go unanswered? In this sermon, Pastor Lars Jaensch draws on the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth to encourage us to remain faithful in the small things and in everyday life, to bring our honest questions and disappointments before God – and to trust that "faith in spite of it all" sustains us even during long periods of waiting. Enjoy reading!

I'd like to start right away with a question: Do you know how much time passed between Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, and the beginning of the events in the New Testament? It was about 430 years! In your Bible, it's just a blank page, but centuries actually lay between these two parts of the Bible. This *"intertestamental period"* is traditionally often referred to in theology as the *"400 years of silence"* and strongly reminds me of another era in Israel's history, which is characterized in the Bible as follows:

> **1 Samuel 3:1 (SCH)** In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there was no revelation.

It was exactly the same at the beginning of the New Testament. For over 400 years, God had spoken directly to His people only very rarely, and there was hardly any prophetic guidance. Shocking, isn't it?! Keep that in mind as we now turn our attention to the beginning of the New Testament. Before God, so to speak, wrapped Himself in silence, His Word had repeatedly pointed to the promised Messiah, the Redeemer of Israel, and announced His coming. But then, for many centuries – apparently – nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. What must that have felt like?

THEY LED A LIFE THAT PLEASED GOD.

But now the people of Israel – without realizing it – were standing at a turning point in history, and the New Testament begins with the story of an elderly couple. This elderly couple had been chosen by God to pave the way for God's work in space and time. So, dear reader, if you belong to the older generation, don't write yourself off just yet, and don't rush to retire to your golden years! God can and will still accomplish great things through you – you are to be a trailblazer for future generations and thus help fulfill the very last prophecy of the Old Testament!

> **Malachi 3:24 (GNB)** He will turn the hearts of the parents toward their children and the hearts of the children toward their parents. He will reconcile both with one another …

And now follow me straight into the beginning of the New Testament, an exciting biblical story that Luke tells us and that has lost none of its relevance to this day.

> **Luke 1:5–6 (GNB)** At the time when King Herod ruled over the land of Judea, there lived a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife, too, came from a priestly family; her name was Elizabeth. Both lived lives that pleased God; in everything they followed the Lord's commandments and instructions.

This brief and concise description of our couple alone is truly remarkable. Luke writes about them here: "Both lived lives that pleased God; in everything." And now keep in mind what I mentioned at the beginning: They lived in an era when the Word of God was rare – for over 400 years, there was silence, nothing but silence. To me, that is true faithfulness in the small things, consistency in everyday life, and reliability behind the scenes – even when you're not in the spotlight and no one is applauding. I find that extraordinarily admirable.

When I read this, a prayer forms in my heart: "Please, God, keep me on the path. I hope that in Your annals, exactly this will be recorded about me as well!" I think Zechariah and Elizabeth simply persevered – even on difficult and dark days, even when things didn't go exactly as they had imagined. Try to put yourself in their shoes. I wouldn't want to be in their shoes. Going through that – for many decades – was certainly not always easy! But look at the result: Because they remained faithful, we find their story in the Bible today, as an example and encouragement for our own journey of faith!

> **Romans 15:4–5** (HOF) What was written long ago in the Holy Scriptures applies to us; we are to learn from it. It encourages and comforts us so that we may place our hope in God's promises and hold fast to them. But it is God who continually gives us new courage and comfort to remain steadfast.

So today, let's learn from this elderly couple. What was their secret? Why did they stay the course unwaveringly through all the ups and downs of their lives? What gave them courage and comfort time and again to remain

steadfast? In summary, it can be put this way: God sees what is hidden. He sees the faithful service you perform in secret, when no one says "thank you." He sees your patience in difficult situations, your sincere – sometimes sighing – prayers, and your persistence and endurance when your strength is running low. Faithfulness in the small things, in secret, and in the routine of ordinary, everyday life is the spiritual ground on which God works.

Let's now take a closer look at the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. The New Testament begins with them. They are the very first people mentioned there. They became the forerunners of the Messiah, of Jesus Christ – not because they performed great, heroic acts of faith, but because they simply remained faithful, steadfast, and reliable – despite everything.

THEY REMAINED "IN THE WORD."

Let's return once more to the "400 years of silence." It's not as if someone had pressed the pause button during this time and everything was now, so to speak, on "standby." During this era, there were tremendous upheavals and events of great significance worldwide, including in Israel – but that is not our topic here and now. At this point, I would like to highlight an important development: During this interim period, the Jewish synagogues emerged. This is a Greek word meaning assembly or gathering.

After the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C., the Jews began gathering in private homes or on riverbanks during the Babylonian Exile to preserve their religious identity. Instead of offering temple sacrifices, they met there regularly to pray together, fast, and read from the traditional scriptures – the Torah. Eventually, synagogues also developed within the Land of Israel itself into local centers for community and Torah study, thereby ensuring the continued existence of Judaism. In this way, the synagogues became a vital nucleus of Jewish identity.

At that time, the revealed "Word of God" was rare, while what I would like to call the "general Word of God" – the Holy Scriptures – gained great significance and became a central anchor and point of orientation for Jews throughout Israel.

This was precisely what Zechariah and Elizabeth had in mind: "They remained in the Word" – steadfastly, day after day. They heard it regularly and aligned their entire lives with it. They obeyed God's commandments with reverence and faithfulness.

> **Luke 1:6 (GNB)** Both led lives that pleased God; they followed the Lord's commandments and instructions in everything.

I believe the first lesson from this couple's story is steadfast faithfulness in following God and an unwavering commitment to His Word. So if God seems to be silent in your life for a time, simply remain faithful and steadfast in what He has told you so far. Stick to the Bible. Stay on course, live and act according to the Word you already have – and don't constantly search for a new revelation. Why would God tell you something new if you haven't put the old into practice yet? Rest assured, He will make Himself heard when He has something to say to you.

On the other hand: If God is silent, that doesn't necessarily mean you've done something wrong or are on the wrong track – quite the opposite. Perhaps you are 100% right in the center of God's will and exactly on His path, and you don't need a course correction, but simply faithfulness, endurance, and perseverance in your daily walk with Him – even when no one is watching! Sometimes this truly requires patience, but that is precisely why the Bible encourages us in many places to hold fast to God's Word unwaveringly and steadfastly and to remain on His paths:

> **Hebrews 10:35–36 (NGÜ)** Do not give up your courage in faith (your confidence) now! You will one day be richly rewarded. Yes, what you need is steadfastness. For if you steadfastly do God's will, you will one day receive what He has promised you.

Another Bible translation puts it this way: "You will carry off the promise" – just like a treasure you've searched for long and persistently and have now finally found!

Sometimes prayers are answered very quickly. And then there are prayers that accompany us for years – sometimes even half a lifetime: heartfelt desires that are especially important to us, such as the longing for a child, for healing, a happy relationship, reconciliation, or a clear path forward. We pray for them again and again, yet sometimes time passes, doors remain closed, and it feels as though the answer is never coming. This is exactly what happened to our two protagonists in Luke 1. Their story is far from over. In addition to the era in which the two lived and their journey of faith, Luke briefly sketches their dramatic and heart-wrenching personal fate in just a few words:

> **Luke 1:6–7 (GNB)** Both led lives that pleased God; they followed the Lord's commandments and instructions in everything. But they were childless, for Elizabeth was unable to have children; moreover, they were already very old.

THEY BELIEVED. DESPITE EVERYTHING!

And on top of that. Yes, sometimes life really hits you hard. Both of them lived lives that pleased God – B-U-T! This "BUT" holds so much pain and disappointment, so much unfulfilled longing and decades of hope, so many questions that had been waiting for an answer for so long. In Luke 1, nothing is sugarcoated or glossed over. Old age, infertility, and the long wait are clearly stated in the text. The Bible is brutally honest – realistic and true to life. Nor does it deny the immense tension of this fate: The couple was faithful and devoted; their lives – as it explicitly states – pleased God; yet they remained childless and had no children. The question is therefore entirely legitimate: Why? We deal with unfulfilled desires in a biblical way by acknowledging and allowing the pain, rather than repressing it or convincing ourselves that we shouldn't be sad. God is big enough to handle our tears and our disappointment, but He can only heal what we do not hide from Him.

When a wish remains unfulfilled for a long time, it's often not just the wish itself that hurts, but also what others – or we ourselves – say about it. Sometimes we hear pious-sounding sayings that, while well-intentioned, fall short: "God surely has a better plan for you" or "You just need to have stronger faith" or "There must be sin involved!" What am I supposed to say to such phrases, with the sensitivity of a steamroller? Actually, it leaves me speechless, but one thing I can say for sure: N-O-T helpful! There are simply no quick answers to some questions! Anyone who simply brushes off unfulfilled longings with quick answers isn't really taking the other person seriously. The Bible withstands the tension rather than artificially resolving it. Our biblical example today, in particular, makes it very clear that the answering of prayers (that is, the fulfillment of our wishes) is not something we deserve or a reward, and that their absence is not always due to guilt or failure.

Zacharias and Elizabeth must surely have asked God the question "Why?" time and again. Later, the angel said to Zacharias: "Your prayer has been answered." So they prayed persistently – and God did not simply turn a deaf ear or cold-heartedly ignore their pleas – he listened very closely and did not forget them. He always had them in his sight.

It is biblical and entirely legitimate to ask God, with tears of disappointment or sadness in our hearts: "Why? How much longer?" This honesty is not a lack of piety – it is the beginning of a genuine conversation with God, or at least it can be. Surely Zechariah and Elizabeth also knew Psalm 13, and perhaps they brought their questions and their pain before God using precisely these words – instead of glossing over them, suppressing them, or even simply "smiling them away" piously:

> **Psalm 13:2–6 (HFA)** Lord, how long will you forget me, how long will you hide yourself from me? How much longer must worries torment me, how much longer must sorrow gnaw at me day after day? How much longer will my enemy stand over me? Lord, my God, turn to me and answer me! Let me be joyful again and gain new courage; otherwise, I am doomed. My enemy would triumph and say, "I've brought him down!" My adversaries would rejoice over my downfall. But I trust in your love and rejoice that you will save me. With my song I will praise you, for you, Lord, have done me good.

Just as in the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, verse 6 of the psalm also resonates with a "I believe. Despite everything!" They dare to renew this trust every day, despite unfulfilled longings and disappointment, despite the impression that the natural window of opportunity has long since closed for good, and despite God's silence, which sometimes weighs heavier than an outright "no."

But what does one do in the meantime, when the wish has not yet been fulfilled – or perhaps will never be fulfilled as one had hoped? Above all else, Zechariah and Elizabeth guarded their hearts and did not allow disappointment to make them hard, cold, cynical, or bitter. They were aware that God's Word truly wants to be taken seriously – and surely they also had a vital Bible verse in mind that they always wanted to keep in sight:

> **Proverbs 4:20–23 (HOF)** My child, listen carefully and pay attention to what I tell you! Do not despise my words, but commit them firmly to memory! They are the key to life and keep your whole body healthy. What I am advising you now is more important than anything else: Watch your thoughts (or: your heart), for they determine your life!

THEY WERE ALSO FAITHFUL IN PRIVATE.

Another key lies in the faithfulness of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Faithfulness fundamentally means reliability, consistency, and commitment – that is, holding fast to a relationship, a promise, a task, or a conviction, even over a long period of time or through difficult phases. Depending on the context, very different aspects come to light:

- **In relationships and friendships**, reliability, loyalty, and mutual trust are what count – not only in good times, but also when things get tough.

- **In everyday life** and when carrying out tasks, faithfulness means perseverance, a sense of responsibility, and consistency in the little things – even when no one is watching or immediately visible results are lacking.
- **In a spiritual or biblical context**, faithfulness means persistently holding fast to God's Word and to daily, personal discipleship – even when God seems silent or prayers remain (seemingly) unanswered for a long time. This faithfulness allows for honest questions and doubts, but it means not giving up or becoming bitter despite everything. Hence the title of my sermon: *"I believe. Nevertheless!"*

In short: faithfulness means sticking with it and being reliable – even when circumstances aren't exactly cozy or comfortable. The unshakable faithfulness of the elderly couple "in everything" becomes clear in a brief account in which Luke gives us a glimpse into their very ordinary daily life.

> **Luke 1:8–9 (NLB)** One day, while Zechariah was performing his duty in the temple – since his division was on duty that week – he was chosen by lot, according to priestly custom, to enter the sanctuary and offer the incense.

Despite everything, they held fast to their faith and did not withdraw from the community. They remained faithful to the path entrusted to them: their daily lives, their service, and their fellowship with God. Biblical faithfulness does not mean, "I'll pretend that none of this bothers me, as if no doubts were gnawing at me." Rather, it means: "Even if my most important question remains unanswered, I will not neglect the other good things in my life." Those who remain faithful in the small things, in secret, and in the normality of everyday life – and who hold fast to the Word of God – protect their hearts from becoming hard, cold, cynical, and bitter during the long wait. Hebrews 6 therefore gives us a very important exhortation to take with us:

> **Hebrews 6:11–12 (NGÜ)** It is therefore our earnest desire for each of you that you continue to show the same zeal (perseverance) until the very end, so that the hope God has given you may be fully realized. So do not become indifferent (sluggish), but follow the example of those who waited unwaveringly and with full confidence for the inheritance promised to them (the fulfillment of the promise) and who will therefore also receive it.

Trust in God may not protect us FROM disappointments, but it certainly protects us IN them. Perhaps as you read this sermon, you're thinking: "My faith isn't as strong right now as it used to be – my worries, my exhaustion, and unanswered prayers and wishes have drained me and weakened my trust in God." Yes, that's probably true! In fact, everyday life, prayers that go unanswered for a long time, and disappointments can really make us tired, sluggish, indifferent, or even sick over time. That's only human. And the Bible is realistic enough to acknowledge this without passing judgment. But it also shows us a way out:

> **Isaiah 40:27–31 (HOF)** Why do you say, "The LORD does not know what we're going through! It doesn't matter to our God when we have to suffer injustice"? Don't you understand? Or have you never heard? The LORD is the eternal God. He is the Creator of the earth – even the farthest lands He has made. He neither grows weary nor weak. His wisdom is infinitely deep. He gives new strength to the weary, and He makes the weak strong. Even young people grow weary and lose their strength; strong men stumble and collapse. But all who set their hope on the LORD gain new strength. They are like eagles whose mighty wings are renewed. They walk and do not grow weary; they run and are not exhausted.

Today I want to encourage you and awaken a new hope within you: Let yourself be inspired by Zechariah and Elizabeth – they show us that perseverance and faithfulness to God will certainly pay off in the end. God's ways far exceed our understanding and do not follow a human timeline. Even if His answer is still hidden, you can trust that He does not forget your prayers. However, this does not mean that every unfulfilled wish will ultimately be granted exactly as you imagine it. The Bible also describes ways in which a wish remains unfulfilled and yet God still sustains us – as in the case of Paul, to whom God once said, "My grace is sufficient for you." A faith "in spite of everything" is not a second-rate faith. Sometimes it is the most sincere and tenacious faith there is. For it holds fast, even when it cannot yet see.

Oh, and by the way: I'll tell you in two weeks, in the second part of this little Advent sermon series, how the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth turned out and what important role God still had in store for them in His story. I'm already looking forward to sharing it with you! God bless you!