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Chapter 1

WHAT IF I MISSED IT?

Growing up, I was obsessed with pictures of Mary and baby Jesus. I collected prints of Renaissance paintings and ancient icons and taped them to the inside of my high school locker. While I was mystically drawn to the Madonna and child, it was a bonus to encounter a portrayal of the entire Holy Family. Typically, in a creche of the Nativity, huddled together in the glow of the straw-filled cave, Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus seemed pristine, otherworldly. This picturesque scene is and was a popular household display.

Perhaps you felt the same way growing up. There was a bit of awe and wonder when looking at a classic Nativity set. But what about everybody else in the Christmas story? Ever wonder why your standard Nativity sets only include a handful of characters: Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, an angel, a sheep, maybe a cow or two? What about Uncle Zechariah and Aunt Elizabeth present at

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the manger? These B-players emerge as extras in God's story, but could it be they have significantly more to teach us about the intersection of God's story with ours? I wonder if perhaps we might find ourselves in these characters exactly because they are not so picture-perfect. They seem more accessible, more real, and grittier than the Holy Family.

Real life! Real life is what I am after in this Advent journey. I want to plumb the depths of these other characters to understand their experience and how it might relate to ours. Even with centuries separating us, could these Advent sidekicks teach us about hope, love, joy, and peace? I believe they can. Today we start this journey with dreams.

God-Sized Dreams

God puts dreams in all of us. It's just that sometimes we find ourselves wavering, and we doubt the legitimacy of our dreams. You have a dream, a vision, a goal for your life, and in the waiting, you begin to wonder, is this even possible? Could this actually happen? Do I have what it takes?

Perhaps over the last few years you have forgotten *how* to dream. There have been plenty of pandemic problems, distance delays, and a grab bag of straight-up cancellations. And it is no wonder with so much loss of potential, profit, and people we love, dreaming again seems, well, like an exercise in disappointment. I am an optimist by nature. I have spent most of my life deciding against the odds to take the risk and dream forward. Even in the middle of the pandemic, I was dreaming about my future. I was ready for a change—at least a change in scenery. That's when I started talking with my mom about my plans for the future.

What If I Missed It?

I asked my mom if she would consider taking a trip with me. It was January 2021, and I was dreaming of a place and space with a bit more sunshine, maybe a beach, or at least a beautiful body of water. January in Ohio is nearly always a shade of gray and I needed sunshine! And truth be told, I wanted to get away and escape pandemic life. My mom quickly said she was not interested in any of that, dashing my dreams for fun in the sun. She piped up and said, “Rachel, I am determined to go to the Holy Land before I die. It’s at the top of my bucket list.”

“The Holy Land?” I questioned.

“Yes, the Holy Land,” she said with dogged determination. “I’m not interested in going anywhere else!” Okay, Mom, tell me what you really think!

“Who knows, Mom?” I piped back, “those kinds of opportunities come up from time to time for pastor types. Maybe we could go sooner than later.”

“You know, Rachel,” my mom said wistfully. “I’ve always wanted to be a missionary, but I guess it was not in the cards.”

“Yes, Mom, I know,” I answered.

Now, somehow this trip of a lifetime to the Holy Land would be tied to my mother’s calling as a Christian who traveled throughout the globe on behalf of God. For my mom, being a missionary had seemed like a dream beyond her reach. As a teenager who gave her life to Jesus, she had aspirations of serving God throughout the globe. But those dreams just seemed impossible.

For starters my mom had not flown on a plane since the summer of 1972 when she visited my dad while he was at Lackland Air Force base in San Antonio, Texas. My dad served in the United States Air Force, and they were soon to be engaged.

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It was young love, and Linda Lou overcame her fear of flying just to see my father. It was the one time in her life that she boarded a plane. My mom is not exactly the traveling type. She has not spent a lot of time beyond the boundaries of Hocking County, Ohio.

Do not misunderstand what I am saying about my momma. She has the desire! These God dreams are in her heart. It is just that sometimes life happens, plans change, and those dreams—well, they are all but dashed. And sometimes people feel like they must give up on their dreams. My mom could not conceive of the combination of raising a family and working for God.

Giving Up on Your Dreams

Perhaps you have a dream that has lived rent-free in your head and heart for a long time. You dreamed of a career practicing international law. Maybe you believed you would live in a space and place more luxurious, or at least warmer. You had plans for relationships, for marriage, for children, but it just did not seem like it was in the stars. You had a vision for yourself, your family, your community, or even the world, and well, it just didn't take shape.

**Waiting is active waiting with minds,
ears, and hearts leaning in, tilted
toward a hope-filled future.**

Advent is a season of waiting, but do not for a second think that this kind of waiting is a passive activity. Waiting is anything but passive. Even for you worrying types. Waiting is active waiting

What If I Missed It?

with minds, ears, and hearts leaning in, tilted toward a hope-filled future. We actively wait, placing our trust and lives in God's hands. And in this season of waiting, actively waiting for the coming Christ, we are a people of audacious hope.

In Advent we expect the unexpected. The atmosphere is ripe for dreaming! And yet for many of us it is difficult to get ourselves through the pessimism of past problems, political pressures, family frustrations, and dreams deferred in order to hope for the future.

And we are not alone. There are people in the Advent story who found themselves in a similar situation. Giving up on their dreams, they became steeped in a world of reality. What is actually possible in our ordinary lives? This was Zechariah and Elizabeth's story. They had hopes and dreams for their future. Family seemed to be part of the formula, but the Bible tells us that they just never had children of their own.

The Gospel of Luke tells the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. They are not mentioned in Matthew, Mark, or John. Luke's telling of the Advent story is just a shade different than that of Matthew. For starters, Luke wanted the reader to know who was in charge, who was seemingly in power. It was Herod the Great and a variety of others in the political atmosphere. Certainly, Luke himself seemed heavily influenced by the Roman way of life, until he wrote of his encounters with this Jew named Jesus that set the whole world on fire with the presence of God:

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

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because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. 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. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Luke 1:5-10

I imagine many of us have felt like Zechariah and Elizabeth. You had a vision and dream for your life and for whatever reason it just did not turn out the way you'd hoped. I imagine that through the decades this faith-filled couple was wondering, *What if we missed it?* They might have wondered if they missed their chance at having a family. Perhaps you have asked yourself a question. What if I missed my shot? What if I missed my opportunity of a good life? What if I missed out on a decent career? What if I missed a solid relationship? What if I missed it?

The past has a funny way of playing tricks on our future. Too often we romanticize the past and ignore the possibilities of the present. Anytime my husband, Jon, begins to talk about his high school or college football days, I tease him by calling out "glory days." He seems to fawn over the excitement of the past. But the truth is I too have fond memories of high school teammates and college races.

In the summer of 2022, I found myself sorting through boxes of trophies and banners from high school and college. It had been eight years since I had placed those boxes in an upstairs attic, and I had all but forgotten they were there. Eight years spent at Ginghamburg Church felt like a crucible of leadership. We navigated through beautifully horrific leadership transitions, devastating storms, a mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio, and the crushing pressures of COVID-19. And near the tail end of that

journey, we came to the other side to a diagnosis for our youngest child, the single most precious addition to our family in those eight years.

Sarah was diagnosed with Marfan syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that affects all the connective tissue in her body. Marfan syndrome had somehow randomly invaded her DNA. My husband took her to see a pediatric ophthalmologist. Her regular eye doctor was concerned about the cloudiness in our then five-year-old's eyes. "She may have cataracts," the doctor remarked.

"Cataracts?" I questioned.

It seemed impossible for a tiny child to have cataracts. She reassured my husband and me that it was possible. It was spring break, and my teacher husband took her to the appointment. They waited for what seemed like forever to see the doctor. So, when my husband texted, "doc believes Sarah has Marfan syndrome." I was relieved. We have a possible answer!

"Rachel, did you Google that?" Jon texted back.

No, I had not Googled it. But when I did, I was a puddle on the ground. Not only could the disease affect her eyesight, but also every single piece of connective tissue in her body, including her heart.

While it was not the exact reason for my packing my belongings and family and moving halfway across the state of Ohio, her diagnosis was the tipping point. All the future dreams I had for Ginghamburg Church and my family were deferred. Sarah would not be deterred. That bundle of joy, all five years of her, was eager to step into Momma's past and sort through my attic boxes.

For Sarah, this seemed like a treasure chest of discovery, a version of her mother she did not quite understand and a version

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of myself I had nearly forgotten. There were running plaques and medals, an assortment of slides for my art portfolio as I had contemplated colleges of design. There were seven academic achievement awards I had zero recollection of receiving. No wonder I had so much trouble attempting to figure out what I was supposed to do with my life! Those were the glory days: high school academic achievements, medals won, and pictures drawn.

“Mommy, I didn’t know you were an artist!” Sarah declared.

“I was,” I remarked as she sorted through the paintings in my high school portfolio. These were and are my dreams deferred. Some days I still dream of being an artist, and yet it just does not seem to be in the cards. We totally can honor the past and celebrate our achievements. But when the past becomes the pinnacle of the present, we find ourselves paralyzed, staring into a future without possibilities. Moving is not easy, because it means change. And change is challenging.

One Sunday afternoon, I was listening to National Public Radio where a neuroscientist was talking about our resistance to change. Even though our brains are constantly changing as we grow and develop, we human types tend to resist changing our minds. Our brains develop these neural pathways and they become content with what they know. It’s like the well-worn path in the woods or ruts that have been created driving the tractor between farm fields and buildings. The ruts get deep and it’s difficult to walk any other way. Like the ruts, these neural pathways get static. It’s hard for our brains to want to change. Hard, but not impossible!

Sometimes we want to hold on to stories or narratives that make sense of our lives: the good, the bad, and the in-between. They are comfortable. These stories that we tell ourselves are

what we know. And our brains sort of hold on to them. We resist changing our minds. Our stories shape our identities. But when our stories distort our reality, they can keep us from moving forward. Friend, does it have to be that way? What happens when our life narrative becomes a barrier to our future? What happens if we refuse to change? We get stuck! And often fear is fueling that paralysis.

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Zechariah was stuck as well. And it took God showing up in Zechariah's life to get him unstuck. Zechariah was one of a number of priests who served in Jerusalem at the Temple. The Temple took center stage in the lives of God's people in Jerusalem. Each priest served one week in the Temple twice a year. Zechariah was performing his priestly duties when it happened that he was chosen by lot to burn incense in the Holy of Holies. This meant a once-in-a-lifetime trip into this sacred space. Not every priest was afforded the opportunity for this special service, and a priest could only be selected once in his entire life. Zechariah was not going to miss that shot.

The process for burning incense was not complicated. Sure, there were very specific instructions: prayers to pray, incense to light, and a benediction to give the listeners in the Temple that day.

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The benediction was the sign that the ceremony was complete. It was an honor, and yet the ritual was simple and quick. Zechariah should have been in and out. But it was not simple and quick, not this time. Luke wrote that while Zechariah was performing the priestly rituals an angel of the Lord stood at the right side of the altar of incense. Can you imagine? A divine being just shows up unannounced in the middle of your unlikely story? Now I know we have these cute pictures of chubby cherubs in our mind, particularly when thinking of a story as sacred as the Christmas story. But angels seem to be anything but cute. Nearly every time a messenger of the Lord shows up unannounced people are afraid. Luke tells us:

When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 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. 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. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Luke 1:12-17

Certainly, that was not the announcement that Zechariah expected to receive that day in the Temple. He was gripped with fear. Whatever he witnessed terrified him to his core! I imagine many of us do not expect the God of the universe to show up at our workplace, and if God did, we too would be paralyzed with