

I'm Gonna Be a Dad! But Wait a Minute!
Advent – A Weary World Rejoices
Luke 1:5-25; 68-79; Genesis 15:1-16

11-27-2022

Good morning,

It is an honor to be able to share with you this morning on this first Sunday of advent. Our theme should be obvious at this point. The children's story hammered that home don't you think? Waiting is and never has been easy for us humans. But I would invite you to reflect with me for a moment on the last page again. It reminds me of another starry night, when the King of the universe takes an old man out to gaze upon the stars. *"Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them."* Then he said to him, *"So shall your offspring be."* (Gen 15:5)

Abram, later renamed Abraham, longs for a son, an heir to carry on his name and his unique relationship with God. Abraham and his wife Sarah were old, too old to have children. And yet, God worked wonders in their lives and so began a covenant relationship with one family and one people.

Fast forward a few thousand years and it seems like the experiment has stalled out. God's people, the Israelites, are not free and the world is as broken as ever. For the last 400 years the people have been waiting for a good word from God, but the prophets have received nothing. The faithful hold out hope that one day God will visit his people and bring about their salvation.

It is against this backdrop that the Gospel of Luke begins the greatest story ever told by introducing us to another righteous couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, both drawing their lineage back to Abraham through his great grandson Levi. Like Abraham and Sarah *"they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord."* They too are without a child and well beyond childbearing years. And yet God chooses to act through them to prepare a way for His coming, for his Advent - for that is what the word means.

[Stand and pray]

We will pick up the story in Luke 1 verse 8. And I would invite you to follow along in your Bibles as we dig into this story together.

Now while [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

Two things we should note for context here.

1.) There were over 20,000 members of the Levites, or the priests, at this time in history. This is way more than could ever serve in the temple at once, so they rotated, and each family took a turn - maybe a week or two per year - to serve at the temple. Zechariah would have had another job - and this was one of the few times each year that he actually served at the temple.

2.) According to some sources, the honor of going into the holy place (not the Holy of Holies - that is only for the high priest - but just outside the curtain to burn the incense)... that honor was only likely to happen once in the life of a priest. Thus for Zechariah this is a special moment that he would have been waiting on for most of his life.

And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. (Luke 1:10-17)

So if we are paying attention, we have heard something like this before. This is the first time God has reached out with a message for his people since the time of the prophets. And it seems like God is picking up where he left off. Look again at the text pastor Keith preached from last week.

From Malachi chapter 4: *"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents"* (Malachi 4:5-6a)
Sound familiar? This is no accident. Luke is making an intentional connection here to Malachi.

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."(Luke 1:18-20)

Commentators make sure to point out here that Zechariah, even in his moment of unbelief, could not ruin God's plan. God is not dependent on our belief to do his will. God is God and God will do what God will do whether we believe it or not, or as Chuck Smith said "your unbelief will not stop the will of God."

This is in contrast to the myth of Santa Claus: the cliché in too many Christmas movies is "just believe". And then human belief somehow powers Santa's sleigh or whatever. "If you just believe" is what they say. I say believe in what exactly? Santa Claus? - My God is bigger than that! Amen?

At any rate, Zechariah, rather than this moment of doubt becoming a wrench in the machine, instead becomes part of God's purpose for his people. We are 100% supposed to make a connection here. Check this out: just as a crisis of faith meant 40 years in the wilderness for the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land, so here a moment of doubt means 40 weeks of silence for Zechariah. It will also mean puzzlement and waiting for the crowds of people outside the temple. The Bible is full of echoes like this.

Picking up in verse 21:

And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. (Luke 1:21-23)

Now the story breaks to Elizabeth's point of view.

After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."(Luke 1:23-25)

Next, Luke is going to weave Elizabeth's story together with Mary's, and we will learn more about that in the coming weeks. For today, however, we are going to skip ahead a few months until the baby is born.

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, [It was traditional in Jewish culture to not name a baby until this ceremony.] but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him. (Luke 1:57-66)

Can you imagine being silent for nine months, and then, in a moment of great joy finally your tongue is loosened? Zechariah has a moment of joyful release, words of praise practically bubbling over. And so this first chapter of Luke ends with the song of Zechariah which beautifully ties together the whole story up to this point.

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

*"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

These first 12 lines call on us to remember the promises to Abraham, Moses and David, that God would work to bring salvation to his chosen people.

Next Zechariah blesses his son John:

*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,*

Finally Zechariah provides a final promise: salvation is not just for God's chosen people, but for all people. Salvation means we can all find forgiveness. It applies to all people everywhere, including you and me. Why?

*because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

These last few verses pull everything together. Zechariah is so familiar with the Hebrew scriptures, and words of the prophets. The reference to the sunrise is yet another connection to the end of Malachi: *"But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves."* (Malachi 4:2)

And verse 79 here is a reference to Isaiah chapter 9:

*"The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.*

Our world is full of people walking in darkness, am I right? Even and especially in this holiday season there are many who sit in despair and sorrow. Sin has left us broken, lonely, angry and depressed.

I still remember one year, of course it happened right before the holidays, when I was in high school, and I found myself going into the Christmas season abruptly alone. Getting dumped by my first girlfriend was hard for me because I internalized it. I didn't tell anyone, even my parents. Even as we visited all my Dad's aunts and uncles and showed everyone the pictures, I kept my secret and my loneliness pent up inside, until on the long drive home from upstate New York I finally broke down and shared the news with my parents. It didn't make the pain go away, of course, but it was the beginning of healing.

What about you? Maybe as you sit here today the prospect of Christmas does not bring you Joy, but sorrow. Whether it is the memory of what once was, and isn't anymore, or the disappointing reality that what might have been will never in fact be, Christmas can be a difficult time of year. Our commercial society would prescribe splurging on stuff, or drowning our sorrows in alcohol and partying, but you and I know that won't work right? Our hope is found, in nothing less, than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

This is the good news promised at Christmas: In our darkness and despair Jesus is reaching out a hand, pulling us up on our feet and walking with us toward the light of day. Oh the Joy and peace we find as we walk in the light of Christ! My advice to you, if you find yourself sad and alone, is to talk to someone about it. Right here, right now, there will be people ready to pray with you after the service. Don't sit in the darkness anymore. Let the light of Jesus shine in your life instead.

Now as we wrap up our service today I want to draw your attention one last time to our friends Gerald and Piggie. Believe it or not there is one more way to tie that story into our text today. Remember that they spend all day waiting, waiting on the stars to shine. As we consider the story of Jesus' birth it is easy to associate stars with the idea that God is with us. The wise men followed a star to find the manger and the shepherds are amazed as the hosts of heaven appear in the night to bring them tidings of great joy. But then Gerald says that next he wants to show Piggie the sunrise.

Thus when we sing "O Holy night, the stars are brightly shining," we envision light breaking through darkness bringing hope and peace. Indeed, "the thrill of hope, a weary world rejoices"... but what does it say next? "for yonder breaks, a new and glorious morn".

Friends, as amazing as it is to wait for the stars to shine in the heavens, how much greater is it to see the break of dawn. In the same way, while we of course long for the joy of Christmas, and as we joyfully celebrate the birth of our savior, how much more will we celebrate when one day Christ shall come again! Advent, after all, is about the first coming of Jesus - of the incarnation, God with us. But it is also about the promise of Christ's return, when "the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings" It is then that all wrongs will be made right. It is then that our tears will be dried and our wounds healed. In this world we will have trouble, but fear not, for Christ has overcome the world! So let us wait patiently for the Lord. It will not be easy, of course. But, it will be worth it. Go in peace.