

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

December 1, 2024, The First Sunday of Advent

Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 1:5-25, 57-66, 80

WAITING WITH THE WAITING ONES—ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH

This First Sunday of Advent we enter a season of waiting and a season of preparing for the coming of the Christ child. A season of slowing down, a season of turning our eyes toward Bethlehem, and we wait. There is no instant gratification in Advent, there are no Black Friday door busters, no buy before midnight tonight. Even if you pitch a tent to be first in line like people did in the early days of Black Friday, you will wait along with everyone else in Advent. We wait for Christmas morning; we wait to welcome our Savior.

The word Advent means “coming;” this is the season we wait to celebrate the birth of Jesus and the coming of Christ again in the end times. We wait and we prepare our hearts to be ready for the joy of Christmas morning.

Slowly, we enter this Advent Season of waiting, preparing, praying, and hoping.

Which is what Elizabeth and Zechariah had done for years: waiting, preparing, praying, and hoping.

They were a couple, like so many other couples in the Bible before them...couples whose names echoed down through the ages of Israel's stories because they longed for a child but had none:

Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Elkanah and Hannah.

Elizabeth and Zechariah had longed to have a child for all the years of their marriage. And now they were too old for children.

Unlike their parents in the faith, no child had been born to them.

There was no son to carry on their family name,

there was no son who would one day marry and give them grandchildren,

and there were no children to care for them in their old age.

In all their years of faithfulness to God they must have wondered, just as their neighbors wondered, if Elizabeth's barrenness was a judgment from God.

While the dream of children was now an impossibility, that longing to hold their own child in their arms never left either Zechariah or Elizabeth. There was a hollowness within their spirits that nothing had ever filled.

Yet Elizabeth and Zechariah were faithful followers of their God.

Years later they were remembered for that faithfulness and devotion to their God,
and the ways they lived according to God's laws and teachings.

They lived in the rhythms of Temple life and worship of their God.

Zechariah served as a priest at the Temple in Jerusalem. Every morning and evening, according to God's commands back in the time of Moses, two types of offerings were made at the Temple in Jerusalem. The priests from all over Israel were divided into 24 groups, each named for one of Aaron's 24 sons. Each group served at the Temple twice a year for a week at a time. At each gathering the names of the priests who had not yet gone into the sanctuary to make the Incense Offering were gathered. Then names were drawn by lot for whose turn it was. Because there were so many priests, if a man was truly lucky his name was drawn once in his lifetime.

The day came when Zechariah received this privilege. He was selected to enter the Temple to offer the incense offering. As a priest this was the most important day of his life. He left the crowds behind as they were praying in the courtyard, and he entered the sanctuary itself, alone. Once inside the sanctuary, in the room outside the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, he was meant to collect the ashes from the previous day's incense burning, and light the new incense. He wasn't supposed to linger there, but to immediately come out to the people and give them a priestly blessing.

But on this day Zechariah broke with tradition and expectation, and did not immediately come back out of the Temple. It was a day on which God also broke with tradition by sending a messenger, the Angel Gabriel, to meet Zechariah.

The story tells us exactly how Zechariah felt as he entered one of the holiest places in Jerusalem, and found an angel standing by the altar. He was terrified! The Angel Gabriel spoke words that nearly every angel visitor has spoken when coming to humans: "Do not be afraid!" It is very clear that meeting one of God's messengers is an overwhelming experience.

"Do not be afraid!" Gabriel said. "God has heard your years of prayers and Elizabeth will give birth to a son and you will name him John."

This season of waiting during Advent, can bring surprises that we won't see coming. And while that may sound unnerving in 2024, that has enough surprises of its own, Zechariah tells us that sometimes there are really big surprises for good. But sometimes the surprises are so big we may lose all sense of manners and training, and even question God and God's messengers.

There is a quote I bumped into several years ago, that I have on a post-it note on my computer. It reads: "Don't miss out on a blessing because it isn't packaged the way you expect."

When God has a plan for us, the plan will take place. But it may not look like what we have expected. One author points out that when Zechariah questions his wife giving birth he says: "How can this be true? I am old, and my wife is old too." Gabriel's immediate response is: "I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God."

The New Interpreter's Bible—A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol. I: Luke, John.
Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 47.1.9

The "I am old" question and the "I am Gabriel" response pretty much captures God's gift of strong insistence when God has a plan. This story says to us: "Don't miss out on a blessing because it isn't packaged the way you expect."

Advent is a season of the unexpected and the season of God's plans unfolding in each of our lives, and our life as a church. With Zechariah and Elizabeth as our guides for waiting today, we see that God spoke in the middle of Zechariah living out his life of faith. He and Elizabeth were faithful: they worshiped God with the community, they prayed for help and for a child, and they followed the ways of their faith and the commandments of God. In the midst of faithful living God was able to use them in a big way. God chose them to be the parents of John the Baptist, who was to be the messenger of the Messiah.

But Zechariah's questioning led to Gabriel silencing him. His last words were "I am old," until John was born 9 months later and then Zechariah's very first words were a song of praise and prophecy that includes these words (1:68-79) *"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for God has*

looked favorably on God's people and redeemed them. God has raised up a mighty Savior for us in the house of God's servant David."

Zechariah prophesied about the Messiah and about his son who came to be known as John the Baptist, the messenger of the Messiah, saying about 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 by the forgiveness of their sins."*

Then there are these powerful words for the people then, and for us in 2024:
*"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,
 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
 to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

Just as Israel waited for generations for God's promised Messiah, and Zechariah and Elizabeth waiting 9 months for the birth of their promised son, we too are called to wait with hopeful expectation during this season of Advent. In the next four weeks we are called to enter into reflection and waiting, which is completely counter to everything that the Christmas frenzy is going to try to push you into. This is a season to be faithfully countercultural.

This Advent, let us all enter into the temples of our hearts, expecting to praise God there, and let us bring the offerings of our time, our silence, reflection, and our devotion and our expectant listening.

Let us be willing to be surprised by how God meets us in our waiting and preparing. Because I am convinced that if we spend time in that reflection and waiting there will be messages for us, to help us prepare in this season of new birth.

There will be guidance to help us make room in our hearts in new ways for the birth of our Savior, even and especially in 2024.

So, let's avoid the mistake of the faithful, and understandable shocked Zechariah who said: "I am old." May this be a season of not making excuses. Let us not say: I'm too old, I'm too young, I'm too tired, I'm too busy, I'm too sad, I'm too overwhelmed, I'm too 2024'd....you know what your excuse is...so I'll let you fill in the blank, and then let's leave our excuses behind this Sunday morning. Let us leave our excuse behind so we can hear God's messages for us in the sanctuary of our hearts this Advent.

On this first Sunday of Advent, we are entering a season of new birth, a season of heavenly surprises, a season of preparation, a season of hope, a season of angels, and a season of messages from our God.

Enter into the sanctuary of your heart, bringing your longing, your waiting, your preparing. Come with your fear and hope, your challenges and joys, your silence and speech.

"Don't miss out on a blessing because it isn't packaged the way you expect."

God will meet you there!

Let us trust that the ancient words spoken by Zechariah long ago are for us at the beginning of this Advent 2024 Journey: (Luke 1:78-79)

*"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,
 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
 to guide our feet into the way of peace." Amen.*

For background information, see: *The New Interpreter's Bible—A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 1: Luke, John*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, pp. 44-49

Next time: Not everyone will understand our visions or our Advent preparations,

“But no one is named John, what are you doing?” ☺

cf: SER 20-11-22