

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**December 12, 2021, The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent**

Isaiah 12:2-6, Luke 1:57-80

**Spending Advent with Luke's Gospel: Advent 3-The Birth of John the Baptist  
and Zechariah's Prophecy**

Intro to New Testament Reading: This morning's New Testament Lesson is Luke 1:57-80. Two Sundays ago, we heard the beginning of this story. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were too old to have children, and that sorrow had flavored their lives for many years. Zechariah was a priest in their small hill town, and when it was his turn to serve in the Temple in Jerusalem, he was greatly surprised to be met inside the Temple by the angel Gabriel. He was told that Elizabeth would bear a son, and they were to name John. He was told that even before his birth, his son would be filled with the Holy Spirit. He would turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God, and help prepare the people for the Lord, the coming Messiah. (Luke 1: 16-17) Because of his questioning of God's plans, Zechariah was made mute, and was told he would not speak again until these promised things took place. Listen now for the more of Zechariah and Elizabeth's story.

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It was time of division, a time of poverty for many, a time of power struggles and broken systems, it was a time of insurrections and Roman rule, it was a time of uncertainty, and a time when people questioned God and longed for help from above. When would the Messiah, the promised Savior, come to them?

It was a time when God's people held onto to the hope that had been promised to them by their prophet Isaiah over 400 years before: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:2, 6)

They were people walking in darkness, longing for the Messiah. They held onto the promise that God would show up, that God had a plan, that God loved God's people.

Here in this season of Advent waiting and preparing, we have spent the last 2 weeks walking with some of these faithful people in the first chapter of Luke's gospel. In Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Mary's stories we have heard stories of our God showing up with a plan that would bring love to all of God's people.

God's surprising, life-changing plans were spoken by the angel Gabriel, first to Zechariah telling him that he and Elizabeth would have a son John, who would prepare the way of the Lord.

Then Gabriel came to Mary, a young woman in Nazareth who was engaged to be married to Joseph the carpenter. She was told that she was to have a child, by the power of God's Holy Spirit, and name him Jesus.

Gabriel told her: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:32-33)

And now this morning we hear the early moments of John the Baptist's life. It begins with the rather humorous reminder that God's plans are not always our plans. It is eight days since John's

birth and time for his circumcision. Poor old Zechariah is still mute because of his questioning of God's plans. So those gathered from their town, and probably their synagogue, assume they know what must be done, because that's how it's always been done. He will be named after his father Zechariah, and "little Zach" will follow in his father's footsteps and become a priest, of course.

Zechariah is still muted, so Elizabeth speaks up and says, "His name will be John." To which those gathered answer: "But no one in your family has that name." They basically speak the "seven last words of the church: "We've never done it that way before!"

So, Zechariah grabs a tablet and writes what Elizabeth has already said: "His name is John." In writing those words Zechariah is freed from his silence, because the angel Gabriel's promises from God have come true.

Then Zechariah speaks words of a prophecy that proclaims the news that God has shown up. God has a plan for a mighty Savior who was promised years ago by the prophets.

And now this eight-days old baby will grow up to become a prophet of the Most High God, and will go before the Messiah, to prepare the people for his coming.

This argument about the baby's name may seem like a small thing, but John will not follow in his father's footsteps, he will walk in the path that God has chosen for him. He will be the one who prepares the way for the Messiah. He will give knowledge of salvation to the people and the forgiveness of sins, calling the people to turn to God.

God has a plan that no one could have imagined.

see ideas in: <https://bible.org/seriespage/3-why-john-was-not-named-little-zach-luke-157-80>

Zechariah's prophecy ends with these words:

"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." (Luke 1:78-79)

Or as the Message translation puts it: "Through the heartfelt mercies of our God, God's Sunrise will break in upon us, shining on those in the darkness, those sitting in the shadow of death, Then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace."

Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Mary and Joseph, held onto the promise that God would show up, that God had a plan, that God loved God's people. They invite us this Advent season to do the same.

Because this is a time of division, a time of poverty for many, a time of power struggles and broken systems, it is a time of insurrections, and gun violence, and racial divides, it is a time of a world pandemic, a time of uncertainty, a time of our own and our family's sorrows and griefs, and a time when people question God and long for help from above.

The prophecy has come true for us, and we have been commanded to tell the Good News: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high has broken upon us, giving light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, guiding our feet into the way of peace."

The prophecy is true and we must not be silent any longer:

God shows up, God has a plan, God loves God's people.

Jesus came that we might have life, and of his kingdom there will be no end. (Luke 1:33)

Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, and John the Baptist invite us to believe and live this good news our God has given us through them: the promised Savior, our Messiah has come.

“For we, the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;  
we who lived in a land of deep darkness—on us light has shined.”

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.” (Isaiah 9:2, 6-7)