

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

November 22, 2020, The 1st Sunday of Advent

Psalm 65, Luke 1:5-25, 57-66, 80

The Angels of Advent: An Angel of the Lord Came to Zechariah

Nine years ago was the first, and the last, time that I went shopping on Black Friday. I must confess it was actually worse than shopping on Black Friday, I went to a store at 9:00 p.m. on Thanksgiving night on my way home from a great Thanksgiving Day with friends. My reason for going was a good one, Michaels had an amazing sale on yarn that I just couldn't resist.

But let me just tell you, it was scary! Michaels was a mad house. Quiet, crafty Michaels, usually filled with creative, thoughtful, crafty people, was filled with crazy women with carts. There were herds of them, sometimes three generations in a row. The adrenalin levels were high, people were clearly at the beginning of a night of bargain hunting, and they all seemed so happy and excitable and driven. And of course, the yarn aisles are way in the back of the store.

Not only did it not feel anything like Christmas, or joy, or giving, it felt nothing like Advent. That one time will last me a lifetime, and I have great admiration for those of you who are so brave as to make this a yearly tradition. Except this year of course!

This First Sunday of Advent we enter a season of preparing. 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 door busters. Even if you pitch a tent to be first in line, you will wait along with everyone else in Advent. We wait for Christmas morning.

The word Advent means "coming;" this is the season we wait for the coming of Christ; we wait to celebrate the birth of Jesus again. We wait and we prepare.

There was a Dominican monk in 14th century Germany, Meister Eckhart, who once wrote: "We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born." He went on to write: "We are all meant to be mothers of God.

What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly
but does not take place within myself?

And what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace
if I am not also full of grace?

What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son
if I also do not give birth to him in my time and my culture?

This, then, is the fullness of time.

When the Son of God is (born) ~~begetten~~ in us."

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 before them...couples whose names echoed down through the ages of Israel's stories because they longed for a child:

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 were both from priestly families, descendants of God's first priest Aaron. 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 lots were drawn 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 he was meant to collect the ashes from the previous days 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 a terrifying 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 2020 that has held surprise after surprise, Zechariah tells us that sometimes they 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 earlier this year that is one of my antidotes to 2020. I have it on a post-it on my computer. From what I can find, its author is anonymous. It reads: "Don't miss out on a blessing because it isn't packaged the way you expect."

One of the books I read this week makes it clear that when God has a plan for us, the plan will take place. But it may not look like what we have expected. This 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.

Advent is a season of the unexpected and the season of God's plans unfolding. And with Zechariah as our guide 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 rules 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, 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 his son John saying: "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 who dwell in 2020: "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 silence 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.

Now if you are a parent this call to silence and waiting may sound like pure fantasy. But I've learned from other parents that morning shower time, or drive time, works just as well as retired folks having the luxury of sitting in a comfy chair for as long as they like! Not that retired folks aren't busy, but you know what I mean!

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 and our devotion and our expectant listening.

I am convinced that if we spend time in that silence 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 2020.

And let's avoid the mistake of 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 2020'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 be countercultural on this Black Friday weekend, and in these weeks before Christmas, and truly prepare in Advent 2020 because in the words of Meister Eckhart:”

“We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born.”

Let us trust that the ancient words spoken by Zechariah long ago are for us at the beginning of this Advent 2020 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. I: Luke, John*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, pp. 44-49