

ADVENT 2019

Part 1: "The Advent of Hope"

Luke 1:1-25

Sunday, December 1, 2019 (The First Sunday of Advent)

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"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. Now while he 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. 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.'

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.' 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. 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 1:1-25, ESV)

Heavenly Father, I thank you that you are a God who breaks into our story. You are not a distant and uncaring God, but rather you love us more than we love ourselves. Today, by the grace of your Spirit, I pray your Word would give us light where there is darkness, life where there is death, and hope where there is despair. We pray this in the name of our long-expected Messiah, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I. Introduction

Last Friday, Americans rose from Thursday's tryptophan-induced comas to brave the cold weather

and crowded lines surrounding big-box stores across the nation. Some veteran shoppers assembled in platoon like teams, armed with a list of mission objectives and tactical strategies. Some rookies came with nothing more than a printed advertisement and bright-eyed hopes for a good deal.

When the automatic doors slid open, these consumer-warriors charged the fluorescent aisles like the beaches of Normandy. Those lucky enough to avoid getting lost, distracted, or trampled returned home with the spoils of war; toys, tools, and flat-screen TVs. Those not so lucky will live to fight another day, another year, another Black Friday.

Crazily enough, Black Friday is no longer just an American event. It has been exported overseas to nations that do not observe Thanksgiving.

So now globally, this frenetic ritual serves as a fitting inauguration to another “Holiday Season” marked with the hurry and haste and obligatory office parties. By the time the twenty-fifth of December comes and goes, after the presents are opened, the meal is devoured, the extended families go home, and exhaustion sets in, any transcendent “reason for the season” seems little more than easily forgotten nostalgic sentimentality.

This was not always so. Historically, for followers of Jesus, the holiday season began not with Black Friday, but with the first Sunday of Advent (which happens to be today). But what is Advent?

The word Advent itself derives from the Latin word “adventus,” meaning “arrival.” In the Christian liturgical calendar, it is a sacred season of anticipation, leading up to and preparing for Christmas day. It is a season of longing, wherein Christian worshippers stir their hearts and imaginations to yearn for the return of Christ and his Kingdom, as the ancient Israelites yearned for the coming of the promised Messiah.

Advent is often celebrated in churches and in homes by the lighting of candles around an evergreen wreath. For each of the four Sundays prior to Christmas Day, a new candle is ignited, often accompanied by a reading of Scripture. As Advent progresses, the burning candles build in number until Christmas Eve or Christmas Day when, at last, the central white candle is lit, symbolizing that as Christ has already come into our world, he shall surely return again.

I have come to believe that observing liturgical seasons like Advent trains our hearts to remember what is most important. Good liturgy frames our lives within the story of the gospel, over against the competing stories that the world imposes on us.

So this year, as a church family, as we take the journey of Advent together, we will return to the beginning of the gospel of Luke. And that might surprise you because, as a church, we have been slowly walking through the book of Luke for the better half of three years. Well, that’s true. And in fact, we are planning to complete our journey through Luke in the Spring of 2020. So, for that reason, I think it is appropriate to revisit the beginning of this gospel during this Advent season as we prepare to end it. So for the next four week’s we are going to revisit the first few passages of Luke during this Advent season.

II. The Text

In this first section of the gospel of Luke, I simply want to work our way through the text by organizing it into four headings: *1.) The Prologue of a Gentile Believer, 2.) The Prayer of an Old Priest, 3.) The Promise of a Heavenly Angel, and 4.) The Provision of a Faithful God.*

1.) The Prologue of a Gentile Believer (Lk. 1:1-4).

The gospel of Luke is most likely a book written by a gentile to a gentile. Luke, the author, was the gentile physician turned missionary, who accompanied the Apostle Paul on some of his missionary journeys (cf. Col. 4:11,14). Theophilus, the recipient, was likely a wealthy Roman ruler or benefactor who had just become a Christian, or potentially a Roman governor who was simply trying to understand the new movement of Christianity that was reshaping his world. Thus, Luke is writing to a fellow Gentile an account of why he believes what he believes so that his reader will believe too.

You get the idea that Luke is adopting the posture of an investigative journalist. He wants us to know that the gospel does not belong to the genre of myth. Rather, the gospel is about something that happened in real history.¹ More than that, the gospel is about something that has been “accomplished” (πεπληροφορημένων). In other words, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus isn’t just a story; it is a story that brings to fulfillment all of the prophecies, promises, and proclamations of the Old Testament. Luke is saying this gospel isn’t just history – it is prophetic history, redemptive history, theological history about how God is intervening within his creation through the lives of real people like you and me.²

This is why Luke begins his gospel, not with Jesus, but with a man named Zechariah.

2.) The Prayer of an Old Priest (Lk. 1:5-10).

Zechariah was a priest, a direct descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses. His family heritage went back generations (1 Chron. 24:10). He and his wife are “blameless,” meaning they aren’t perfect, but they have lived lives of faithful worship of God. This is to be contrasted with their childlessness.

In the ancient world, the bareness was not just a personal pain; it was a social shame. Children in this culture were a sign of God’s pleasure and blessing, as well as a sign of social prosperity. Thus, to be childless was a type of shame in the community.

But the Bible also had another very important couple who were once old and childless until they received a surprise from God. This, of course, was Abraham and Sarah – the couple from whom came the nation of Israel. New Testament theologian I. Howard Marshall writes: “...*the implied parallelism with Abraham and Sarah and other OT couples prepares the reader for the possibility of a miracle.*”³

Now, there were likely thousands of priests living in Judea in Zechariah’s day. But on this day, his division was serving the temple, and the lot fell to him to come into the Holy Place within the temple to make prayers to God. The Old Testament Law specified that the altar of incense was to be placed immediately before the veil and the Ark of the Covenant. It was quite literally the gateway to the presence of God (cf. Ex. 30:6). As Dr. Philip Graham Ryken comments: “...*when the priests stood at the altar of incense, they were standing right in front of God...So when a priest was offering incense on the golden altar, he was approaching the mercy seat. He was coming before the throne of grace – the place where God answers prayer.*”⁴

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 25.

² N.T. Wright. *Luke for Everyone*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001, 2004), 8.

³ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 53.

⁴ Ryken, Philip Graham. *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory*. Preaching the Word Commentary Series. Ed. R. Kent Hughes. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 921, 925.

This is actually an important point, but it shows us that God often moves through and speaks through the “normal means of grace” of prayer and worship.

This highlights the importance of simple, consistent, faithful prayer, even in dry times, that we are to intentionally pursue God and seek God even when we don't feel like it because we never know when God will break into our story. This also teaches us that the effectiveness of our prayers is not dependent on our feelings. The effectiveness of prayer depends on God. And as the old Heidelberg Catechism encourages us: **“It is even more sure that God listens to [our] prayers than that [we] really desire what we pray for.”⁵**

But there was something very extraordinary about this moment in history that would have made this vision all the more amazing. The Ark of the Covenant has been long gone. Thus, God's special presence was not in the temple and had not been in the temple for hundreds of years. Quite literally, the lights were on, but no one was supposed to be home. More than that, God had not spoken through a prophet for 400 years (same distance between the pilgrims who sailed on the Mayflower and us). This is not just an angelic vision, which would have been extraordinary by itself. But when Gabriel appears and speaks on behalf of God, 400 years of silence is broken.

You can see why maybe Zechariah would have been praying a half-hearted prayer, doubting the goodness of God, the power of God, the presence of God. So likewise, you might feel like you are in a place where you have not heard or felt or experienced God in a long time.

If that is you, I want you to know Advent is for you. If you have suffered recent grief, or feel forgotten, forsaken, and burdened by chronic suffering, Advent is for you! It is meant to stir your longing for the coming of Christ. It is to stir your heart to hope that in the same way he has already come once, he will come again.

3.) The Promise of a Heavenly Angel (Lk. 1:11-17).

God speaks through this angel named Gabriel. And what is his message? His message is that God will be faithful to his promised word.

The covenant of Abraham was God's solution to heal the brokenness of the world. God would make a family from Abraham that would grow into a nation that would become a kingdom, and through that kingdom, God said, the world would be blessed.

Israel's recent history would suggest that this was never to be. The kingdom had fallen. The ark of the Covenant was lost. God's people were under foreign rule. But then an angel shows up and says that God has heard and answered Zechariah's prayers.

Zechariah probably isn't offering a personal prayer list. I imagine, almost certainly, he is not praying, “God would you please give me an infant, as I go into retirement.” that He is likely praying for God to send the Messiah and bring about his kingdom on earth, but then the response he gets is that he will have a son. Marshall says: “But it is doubtful whether he and his wife felt that it was still worth praying for a son (1:18), and if the angel is referring to Zechariah's prayer in the holy place, he is unlikely to have been praying for a personal request at that time. Prayer for salvation for Israel was

⁵ “The Heidelberg Catechism.” (129). *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*. (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Resources, 1988), 77.

associated with the evening sacrifice (Dn. 9:20), and so Zechariah may have been praying for the coming of the Messiah and the era of salvation (cf. 2:25; 24:21; so, many scholars).⁶

So who will this son be? Gabriel says this son will be named John. He will be a Nazirite (see Num. 6:1-21) set apart for God's purposes, filled with the Holy Spirit, continuing the ministry of Elijah, fulfilling the words of Malachi. Now one thing that is interesting is that Gabriel repeats the last words spoken by an Old Testament prophet. The words of Malachi 4: *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction"* (Malachi 4:5-6, ESV).

In other words, God picks up the conversation right where he left off. And what will be the purpose of his life? He will make ready for the Lord a people prepared. Zechariah's son will be the one who prepares the way for the messiah!

Zechariah would have never thought that his little life was a part of God's plan of redemption. He would have felt forgotten. But nothing could have been further from the truth.

Your situation may seem hopeless, but God is at work.

4.) The Provision of a Faithful God (Lk. 1:18-25).

What is Zechariah's response? He wants to see some I.D. Zechariah wants certainty (See Lk. 1:18, NIV: "How can I be sure of this?"). He is a good man, but his heart seems unable to believe this good news.

Despite our often-holy veneer, our pain and disappointment can twist into cynicism, bitterness, and unbelief. In so doing, we take ourselves from the one who would help us most. Suffering can harden our hearts, but it can also infuse our hearts with a hope that is beyond our present circumstances. As Paul writes the Corinthians: *"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:16-18 ESV)."*

But for suffering to do us good, we must first confront the uncomfortable truth that our pain comes from sin, not from God. Our hope comes not from our ability to control the outcome of our circumstances, but rather from what God is doing and what he will do and what he has done. Our hope comes from Jesus and the kingdom he is bringing.

Advent is designed to teach our hearts to long for that kingdom and to marvel at the One through whom that world has come and is coming. Advent is meant to awaken our hearts to the hope that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to those who believe (Rom. 8:18). Advent is meant to remind us that though there is real darkness in this world, the light still shines in the darkness – and the darkness has not overcome it (Jn. 1:4).

It would be easy to look at this story and think, well, I guess it all works out in the end for good people. But that is not what this story is saying. This story is saying even in the midst of pain, sorrow,

⁶ Marshall, 56.

and what feels like silence from God, the hope is that the Messiah is coming. God is moving even when we can't see it.

So Gabriel reminds the priest of the true reality, and Zechariah gets to be quiet for a while to think through these things. But nevertheless, he goes home, and his wife conceives a child. God is faithful to his word.

Our passage ends with the words of Elizabeth, who knows that she has been seen and known by God and that he has taken her reproach away. She knows well that God is “YHWH Yir-ēh” (יְהוָה יִרְאַה), sometimes known as “Jehovah Jireh” (See: Gen. 22:14). He is *the God who sees and provides*.

III. Conclusion

The name of *Jehovah Jireh* comes from one of the most famous stories of the Bible, a story that Luke, his readers, and perhaps many of you are familiar with. It is the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. And as we look at the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, it is hard not to notice the obvious parallels between their story and the story of Abraham and Sarah.

Abraham and Sarah were another old and childless couple to whom God miraculously gave a child. His name was Isaac, and he was their one and only son together. But after God gave them this son, God told Abraham to do the unthinkable — sacrifice him. So Abraham took his beloved son, placed the wood of sacrifice on his back, and led him up the slopes of a mountain named Moriah. And as Abraham drew out his knife to slaughter his son, God stopped his hand and, by an act of sheer grace, gave him a ram to sacrifice in Isaac's stead. That day Abraham called God *Jehovah Jireh*—God will provide.

Luke knows this as he is writing the account of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Because though Luke's Gospel begins with the story of Zechariah and his son, it is really a story about God and his Son. For one day, God would take his beloved Son, place wood of sacrifice on his back, and lead him up the slopes of Mount Moriah to a peak named Calvary. But here, no substitute was to be found, because, instead, Jesus was the substitute for you and for me. He lived the life we should have lived. He was faithful when we were faithless. He died the death we should have died. But he rose again to give us hope for new life!

Redeemer Christian Church, may we be a people of Advent hope. Even in our pain, our disappointment, and shame may we set our eyes on Christ, and yearn for his kingdom of grace.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1) *Luke's gospel begins with an old man praying and an angel speaking on behalf of God after 400 years of silence. How have you experienced and responded to seasons of spiritual dryness?*
- 2) *Why is it important to pursue God in prayer, even in spiritually dry times?*
- 3) *How should the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth comfort and challenge us in this Advent season?*
- 4) *What are some ways that you can be intentional during this Advent season to stir your heart to worship?*