

Scripture Reading for December 5, 2021

Malachi 3:1-4; 4:5-6 (NIV)

³ “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.

² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

⁵ “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

Luke 1:67-29 (NIV)

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸ “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), ⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, ⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

Sermon: From Fear To Peace

December has arrived and as we get ever closer to Christmas there can be tendency—however old we are—to go *back* to the nostalgic world of our childhood. This often begins with the memories associated with the decorations we hang on our trees, or reliving familiar stories, like Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, or watching our favorite, classic movies yet again. When people sing, “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas, *just like the ones I used to know*,” those words suggest that the dream is behind us and that the way to happiness is to return to an idealized past. Advent, though, is a looking *forward*, it’s about the once and future coming of Jesus. Yes, we celebrate the birth of Jesus, but we are *anticipating* Christ’s *coming* in *all* his fullness and that his kingdom will have no end, and all fears will be replaced by peace. And that’s *not* mere sentimentalism; no, it’s based on our confident expectation that God will keep his ancient promises. That’s also what the birth stories in Matthew and Luke are all about.

The silence of God is over, says Luke in the first chapter of his Gospel. And that ending comes in a surprise visit of an *angel* to an old *priest* called Zechariah. That’s odd in itself because the Old Testaments prophets had long spoken of a coming kingly Messiah, and one therefore might have thought that the story would begin in a palace and with a royal announcement; but that’s not what happens.¹ Luke’s story begins in a religious setting, not a political one.² One could even say that Zechariah, and his aging wife Elizabeth,³ represent the best of the Jewish race, in that Luke tells us that both of them were “righteous before God and honorably followed the commandments.” You might think that if they had such a reputation then their lives would be overflowing with God’s blessing.⁴ But no, they had *no* children and in those days that was seen as a judgement from God resulting in—as Elizabeth herself put it—social disgrace.⁵ And so Luke’s Gospel begins with a strange irony. Nevertheless, although Zechariah and Elizabeth were powerless to conceive a child, they still waited in hope for a miracle baby—and perhaps that was a ridiculous hope given their old age.⁶ In the same way, the Jews themselves were still waiting in hope for the Messiah to come after all these years.

Luke then tells us that one day the angel Gabriel came to Zechariah, and he was “terrified and overwhelmed with fear.”⁷ As usually is the case, the angel calls the person *by name* and says: “Don’t be

¹ That is also the assumption of the Magi in Matthew account (Matt 2:1-2) and might have been Theophilus’ assumption.

² Although religion and politics were intricately linked in those days!

³ Who herself was of a priestly pedigree in that she was a descendent of Aaron himself; Luke 1:5.

⁴ After all, that was the Old Testament expectation, as we saw earlier this year with the story of Job. See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/worship-and-events/bulletins-and-sermons/>.

⁵ Luke 1:25. This is made evident in Luke’s use of Mary’s (or Elizabeth’s?) song, which links to Hannah and her childlessness; 1 Sam 1–2. In so doing, Luke skillfully edits and adapts his birth narrative sources into the style of the Old Testament (LXX), indicating a *continuation* of God’s action in Israel’s history. In keeping with this “childlessness as divine judgement” logic, the birth of John could be understood as the time of judgement is over. (Note: this notion of childlessness as divine judgement is *not* how we understand things today!)

⁶ This connects with Abraham’s wife, Sarah, (Gen 16:1); Rebekah (Gen 25:11), Rachel (Gen 30:1), Samson’s mother (Judg 13:2), and Hannah (1 Sam 1–2). Luke assumes that his readers (including Theophilus) are familiar with the Old Testament and will make these connections.

⁷ Luke 1:12. Zechariah has no reason to expect anything unusual as he enters the sanctuary to perform his privileged duty.

afraid.” Please remember that: God knows you and me by name, and God *doesn’t* want us to live in fear! The angel then announces some *amazing news*: “Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and . . . he will be great in the sight of the Lord. . . . even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will bring back *many* of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah . . . to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”⁸ That is a stunning proclamation on a number of counts! Not only will they have a child—a *son*—but the mention of John in terms of the “spirit and power of Elijah” is incredibly powerful! It indicates that that John will be a *prophet*. But as exciting as that might sound to a priest like Zechariah, the mention of “Elijah” alludes to John being a very *special* prophet—the one Malachi mentions in our Old Testament reading.⁹ *That’s* who Gabriel was referencing, and it means this isn’t just a domestic tale of blessing, but *good news* for the Jews and for the *whole* world. It meant that the day Zechariah, Elizabeth, and other devout Jews¹⁰ had longed for was coming very soon. They were waiting in hope for God’s Messiah, for God to act decisively in history, for God’s light to shine in the darkness once again. And now, at last, it seems that new day is dawning with the promised birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus.

If we are overfamiliar with this story, we can lose sight of its improbability. I think Luke wanted his readers to be shocked and overwhelmed by the angel’s news and so identify with Zechariah. This seems too good to be true and we, like Zechariah, are understandably skeptical. He asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years.”¹¹ And because of that incredulity, the angel Gabriel makes Zechariah unable to speak until the time of John’s birth. I suggest that on one level, this may not have been a punishment, as such,¹² but rather *a sign of promise*, a much-needed confirmation to both Zechariah and others of the reality of this unusual, private encounter. Let’s also *not* forget that Zechariah’s reaction was *precisely* that of Abraham when God told him Sarah would have their miracle son, Isaac.¹³ So Luke is again making Old Testament connections for his readers. Abraham and Sarah, and now Zechariah and Elizabeth, had to wait on God to fulfill his promise of sons to aging parents. Remember, says Luke, that the God of the impossible continues to prove true to his word.

What did John do during this time of enforced silence? We don’t know, of course, but he probably reread the scriptures, as well as listened to his wife! Taking the story at face value, searching the holy texts is quite plausible for a priest to do. After all, an encounter with an angel resulting in real physical consequences would make a sincere Jew look to scripture for context. Luke later tells us what happens next. After Zechariah formally named his son “John,” he could suddenly speak again, and he blessed

⁸ Luke 1:13-17. This angelic speech, unique to Luke in the Gospels, informs us that’s John’s authority is *from God*.

⁹ Mal 3:1-4; 4:5-6.

¹⁰ Including Simeon and Anna; Luke: 2:25-38. Moreover, Simeon’s blessing extends to *non-Jews*!

¹¹ Luke 1:18. Zechariah seems to be incredulous *not* at John’s prophetic vocation, but of the promise of a son!

¹² Although, to be fair, that is how Luke portrays it; Luke 1:19-20. It therefore seems more is expected from a priest than of Mary; Luke 1:34.

¹³ Gen 17:16-17. (“Isaac” means “he laughs,” which was Abraham’s reaction to God’s news.)

God.¹⁴ The people's reaction was one of *fear*, for they also recognised that the specialness of John's birth indicated that *God* had to be at work in this situation and they therefore wondered what John's future would be.¹⁵ Luke uses this dramatic narrative to introduce further theological insights through Zechariah's Spirit-inspired song of proclamation.¹⁶ I suggest that this is Luke's prime focus in these stories and he spends the rest of his Gospel explaining how these divine messages are fulfilled.

As you know, names have meaning. Jesus is a variant of Joshua and means "God is salvation." To make sense of Zechariah's song this we need to know that John's name means "God is gracious," Zechariah means "God has remembered," and Elizabeth means "God is my oath."¹⁷ With these meanings in mind, listen again to parts of Zechariah's prophetic song and hear their echoes: "Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and *redeemed* his people. He has sent us a mighty Savior¹⁸ from the royal line of his servant David, *just as he promised* through his holy prophets long ago. . . *He has been merciful* to our ancestors by *remembering* his sacred covenant that *he swore with an oath* to our ancestor Abraham¹⁹ . . . so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live."²⁰ Note that thanking God for his son, John, is *not* the subject of this part of the song! Why? Because Zechariah knows that if John is the special Elijah-like prophet as Gabriel proclaimed, then the Messiah's coming is soon to follow. Having made that connection, Zechariah's prophetic song is proclaiming God's *gracious* provision of a mighty *deliverer*. His proclamation is all about *God remembering his covenant* with Abraham, a song of praise to God for keeping his promises and for showing mercy.²¹

You can then imagine Zechariah looking down at the baby in his arms as he continues with the second part of his song: "And you, my little son, will be called the *prophet* of the Most High,²² because you will *prepare* the way for the Lord.²³ You will tell his people *how*²⁴ to find salvation Because of God's *tender mercy*, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in

¹⁴ Luke 1:64.

¹⁵ Luke 1:65-66.

¹⁶ Luke 1:67-79; It is called the *Benedictus* after its first word in the Latin translation. Some have thought this prophecy of Zechariah was originally a hymn circulating among followers of John the Baptist and/or Jewish Christians. If so, then versus 76–79 may be a Lucan/Christian addition to make it clear that the focus is on Jesus and that John "will go before the Lord to prepare his ways." Both the *Benedictus* and the *Magnificat* entered into the liturgy in the seventh century.

¹⁷ Or "God is the absolutely faithful one" or "God is the covenant maker."

¹⁸ Literally "horn of salvation" (alluding to 1 Sam 2:1; Hannah's song); see also Ezek 29:21; 1 Sam 2:10; Ps 18:2; 2 Sam 7:8–16.

¹⁹ See Gen 12:1–3; 26:3.

²⁰ Luke 1:68-75 NLT (excerpts). Note Luke's explicit mention of Abraham here also links with [13].

²¹ In fact, in-keeping with Jewish expectation, the Messiah would rescue them from their *political* oppressors, from "all who hate us" – as Zechariah puts it (Luke 1:71, 74; cf. Acts 1:6). They understood their deliverance from their enemies was so they could worship God in peace and without fear. Consider the irony of that aspiration given the ongoing Middle East tensions! And remember, then and now, there is no separation of sacred and secular for devout Jews.

²² Luke 1:76a. "Most High" is a polite euphemism that avoids articulating God's personal and holy name, "YHWH."

²³ Those words would remind Jews of the prophet Malachi, who prophesied: "I am about to send my messenger, who will clear the way before me" Mal 3:1.

²⁴ Having "*knowledge* of salvation" (Luke 1:77; see also 3:1-14 for detail) implies God's rescue will be *realized* in detail and not living merely in the *hope* of it, as Zechariah's and his contemporaries do at this point in time.

darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.”²⁵ This speech carefully differentiates John from Jesus; John is God’s *prophet*; Jesus is God’s *Son*.²⁶ John prepares the way of the Lord;²⁷ it is Jesus who brings God’s salvation. Zechariah explicitly makes the further connection that because John has now come, Jesus will be coming soon to give light to those who sit in darkness and to replace fear²⁸ with peace.

Luke’s pre-Christmas story of the birth of John is a journey, though not from Nazareth to Bethlehem.²⁹ It’s a journey from fear towards peace; Zechariah’s encounter with the angel is fear-inducing and when Zechariah is able to speak again at the naming ceremony of his son, the crowds’ reaction is also one of fear.³⁰ The fear is not so much of the unknown, but fear of the presence of God. Will God act to destroy or to save? To judge or to forgive? Luke answers the question for his readers³¹ at the beginning of his Gospel through the words of Zechariah: God acts to replace darkness with light, fear with peace.

There’s a lot of fear and anxiety in the world today. That fear arises with the uncertainty over omicron, employment and financial security, the loss of one’s perceived freedoms and rights—indeed, all kinds of things, including personal trauma such as relationship loss, health scares, . . . and kids with guns at schools.³² The root cause of our fear, whether its real or imagined—or exaggerated, is a threat of harm in body, mind, or spirit to us or to those we care for. Or simply fear over the future in general—of events that are outside of our control—and the resultant anxiety can be debilitating. Excluding God from our lives can also exacerbate our fears. Nevertheless, one of the interesting things about Zechariah is that he is a *priest*, yet when he has an encounter with God’s messenger, he’s afraid. We can be people of faith and yet still be afraid when God shows up and says, “Your prayers have been heard!”³³ Why is that? Because we are not sure God will *actually* show up, and when God does, it can be scary! It means God is *real*! Yet in that moment Gabriel says, “Don’t be afraid.”

Zechariah’s weird story invites us to move from a fearful place and step on God’s path that leads to peace. And that remind us of our Advent Candle this morning. Peace is not just the absence of fear or of violence, but peace is vital to provide the necessary space for justice, healing, and the opportunity for restoration of relationships with each other and with God. Peace—*shalom*—is therefore necessarily tied to salvation. Peace also emerges when we absorb that *God is with us*, Immanuel,³⁴ on this

²⁵ Luke 1:76-79, NLT. This emphasis on *peace* suggests a powerful, implicit critique of other contemporary Jewish hopes for Israel’s liberation through violent means, made more vivid when we recall this was written after the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in AD 70.

²⁶ Compare Luke 1:76 and 1:32.

²⁷ Mal 3:1; Isa 40:3.

²⁸ Literally, “the shadow of death.”

²⁹ See Luke 2:4.

³⁰ Luke 1:63-66.

³¹ That was important following the fear and darkness of the destruction of Jerusalem and the death of Peter and Paul.

³² A reference to the shooting of students at Michigan’s Oxford High School on Nov 30, 2021, killing 4 and injuring 8.

³³ Luke 1:13. We can be afraid both by the silence (or apparent absence) of God, and by his presence!

³⁴ Matt 1:23.

pilgrimage through life. Even so, “Peace on earth” won’t just magically appear! But peace does begin with *us* as we follow the example of Jesus Christ—the Prince of Peace.³⁵ And peace begins in small ways, just as one candle is lit by a neighboring candle so creating a little more light in the darkness for others to see and follow the Way.

As you know, when John the Baptist grew up, his message of preparation for the coming of the Lord was one of *repentance*. “Repentance” means a U-turn, a reorientation of one’s life back to following God. It is more than “confession” in that repentance is a call to think and behave differently. As we journey through Advent, preparing for the coming of Jesus, let’s reflect again on John’s call to repentance for our behaviour and attitudes so that we are ready for Christ’s coming. One thing that means is *not* trying to go it alone and live *without* reference to God in our lives, but to *include* God in our decision making and to trust in him. We might still get a shock when God shows up unexpectedly, but as we have seen, that’s a feature of the Advent journey. Advent, then, is a time to wait with anticipation for the extraordinary to appear in the ordinary! As we remember that God came in person in the unexpected form of a helpless baby on that first Christmas, what is our reaction to that news today? And because we know that happened, are we now waiting in excited anticipation for *new* signs of God’s presence in our times? Luke invites us to join our voices with that of Zechariah and to serve the God of miracles and new beginnings, and to live in holiness and righteousness and without fear. Amen. Let us pray.

³⁵ Isa 9:6.