

Preparing the Way for Christmas – 1. A People Prepared for the Lord

Malachi 3:1

December 3, 2023

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The season of Advent is upon us. It's a season filled with anticipation and waiting. We prepare by decorating our homes and enjoying the twinkling of lights on our trees. We eagerly await the gathering of family and friends into our homes. We anticipate Christmas morning, the sounds of little feet running to check on stockings. We look forward to singing Silent Night by candle-light. And most importantly, we wait and eagerly look forward to celebrating the birth of the Christ-child...

Now, as much as I love this time of year, it can be easy to forget the invitation of this season to sit in waiting, and instead will spend these weeks in busy preparation. We find ourselves, in these days ahead of December 25th filled with to-do lists and a too busy calendar. There are presents to purchase and wrap. Decorations to place. Schedules to finalize. And somewhere along the way, we can easily find ourselves so swept up in this season of waiting, that we've forgotten to rest, to watch, to wait.

I'm reminded of this cartoon depicting the season. In the first picture there is a clergy woman who, by all appearances is calm and declaring to her congregation: "Slow down. Quiet. It's advent!" She calls us to a season of reflection and anticipation, wrapped in God's warm love. But next to this, is another image. This time, the same clergywoman frazzled and busy. Her eyes wide, and thought bubbles surround her: "Ordered poinsettias? Who's making wreaths? Planned services yet? Got the music? Hurt up. Get to work. It's advent"

You don't have to be a clergy person or even work at a church, to feel her nerves and the pressure of a busy season! But this frazzled image is not the gift of Advent, even if it has become many of our realities. Instead, this is a season where we are invited to find our way back to that first image of calm, filled with hope.

Because advent is a season of preparation — not for our to do lists, but for our hearts. It is meant to be a time that teaches us *how* to wait, and how to have hope *in* our waiting. Because advent is not only the days leading to Christmas.

Instead, Advent is a set aside time in our lives where we wait and watch for Jesus to show up, often in people and places least expected. This can happen at any time throughout our lives, when we find ourselves hoping and praying for the world to turn:

Waiting and hoping, after years of infertility, for the birth of your child.

Waiting and praying for the call from the clinic with test results.

Waiting and wishing that this interview, this day will be the day you find new work.

Waiting and watching the driveway, looking for that familiar car, belonging to someone you love, to finally return home.

Advent is a season of hope-filled waiting. And if we remove the twinkling lights, the gifts wrapped with bows, and the calendars filled with chocolate candies -- we can see far more clearly the time of Advent in our lives:

Let me tell you about one such season in my life: about 25 years ago, following a routine appointment, my Dad was whisked away for an emergency bypass surgery. From the outside, it

appeared to be a normal day: we woke and ate breakfast. Mom drove us to school. We participated in the events of the day: math, science, band and choir.

But from my perspective - the day was anything but ordinary. I remember watching the clock -- now he would be in surgery. And maybe now he was done? When would we hear word of how things went... It was a nervous and painful Advent that happened right in the middle of ____.

Until finally, a note was delivered to me in home-ec. The paper was insignificant, a small piece torn from a notebook, and hastily scribbled on it in green felt pen: "Dad is out of surgery. Everything's fine." Let me say, that note was delivered on angels wings it meant so much... I still have it today, tucked away in a box of keepsakes.

Advent is not a new occurrence. It's not even new since the birth of Christ. But since creation, God's people have been looking toward heaven, filled with hope for the ways God will break through and work in our lives.

We know the world is not yet as it should be - we are divided by many things, we experience the brokenness of relationships, of war, of sickness and death. The promised world God reveals to us in Revelation 21:

"Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and God will dwell with them. They will be God's people, and God will be with them and be their God. 'God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." - Revelation 21

The season of Advent that happens now, ahead of the birth of Jesus is not the only time where we wait and hope for what is to come -- but that there are so many times and places in our lives where we anticipate the ways that God will be revealed.

Every week, as we gather together we pray for God's goodness to be revealed, "*thy kingdom come, thy will be done. on earth as it is in heaven.*" In this petition, we pray for the day when the brokenness of our world - the violence, illness and deaths that plague our news-feeds - will instead be filled with stories of joy and peace.

And we pray for day when the brokenness in our own lives: our healing, our relationships, our anxiety and worries will lesson, too - and find their way toward peace.

We are not the first people to wait with hope for this day. We join our voices and actions with generations past who have waited with hope and prepared for God to be with us.

This year, we will be spending Advent with John the Baptist, whose entire life and ministry was dedicated to helping others prepare for Jesus. He embodies the meaning of advent, as he spends his life declaring the coming presence of Jesus, and calling others to get ready.

Today we hear the beginning of John the Baptist's story, as written in Luke's gospel. It tells us about his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who lived in the time of Herod the Great. Herod was increasing in age and decreasing in health. Many anticipated his death, and prayed that this would lead to God raising up a new king who would rule with justice and righteousness.

Zechariah was a priest who was among those who hoped for a new ruler who would reign with God's goodness. He and his wife, Elizabeth are known to be good and "righteous" people who loved and followed God. Their lives, like that of their son, were ones that defined and embodied advent, in that their whole lives prepared the way of the Lord within their hearts and world.

Scripture also tells us, that they were both old and childless, although they had deeply desired to be parents for many years. Theirs is a story that many share. As many as 1 in 4 women experience miscarriages, and many more people dream of parenthood and never have children. And more broadly, almost all of us, know the real pain of having a clear and specific dream for our life that never comes to fruition.

Whether it's dreams for a healthy relationship, or a career, or stability, or something else — most of us can feel that tug in our heart for something we have long hoped for. And instead, find daily, a way to live in its absence.

It seems that Zechariah and Elizabeth found places of joy in their life, and dedicated themselves to the raising up of God's church and God's people. I like to imagine that they found peace in their hearts, even as it still held out with longing and hope.

And now on this day, Zechariah was chosen to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense. Priests were assigned to serve at the Temple only two weeks of the year, and only a handful of them were selected to enter the Holy Place. It was a great honor then, for Zechariah to have been chosen.

He would enter the space, as oil lamps burned and illuminated the space. Incense would burn, and its smoke would lift to the heavens as a prayer. And in this moment, as he is surrounded by the beauty and holiness of this space, an angel appears.

We pick up in verse 11 and read what happens:

An angel from the Lord appeared to Zechariah, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord's eyes. — Luke 1:11-15a

The word angel in Greek simply means "messenger" - which reminds me that, while we picture angels with wings and golden halos, that a messenger of God can be anyone one of us. We all have the ability to declare, as angels do, the goodness of God among us.

And on this day, the angel brought to Zechariah an answer to his long desired prayer. *Do not be afraid*, the angel said, *Your prayers have been heard, and your wife will give birth to a son.*

I wonder how many years he and Elizabeth had longed to hear these words?
How many months had they held their breath in hope, longing to feel a flutter?

Their story reminds us, that being a people who with with hope, is part of our story of faith. It is shared by many others in scripture, too — from Noah and his family who waited 40 days for the waters to subside. To the Israelites who waited and walked for 40 years in the desert. To the disciples, who would wait three long days, while Jesus was in the tomb.

Have you a prayer that you have waited with hope for an answer?
Have days, or months, or years passed by?

You too, then are part of a long ancestry of people of faith who wait with hope. Waiting is a faithful expression, and so too, is hope. You are not alone when you feel longing or helpless, or

when ever you experience doubt or uncertainty. These are signs of your humanity, and God loves you for them.

In the ancient world, Zechariah and Elizabeth's inability to have children would have been seen by many as a sign of their *unworthiness* or even punishment. And they likely experienced a great amount of shame. Luke's gospel makes sure to correct that, by telling us right away that they are a "righteous". This is intentionally done to remove any sense of fault from them, and to help us understand they are a good and faithful couple whom God loves very much.

Seasons of waiting, or prayers that seem to go unanswered, are never a sign of a lack of faith, or a sign that God is not present to you. God does not "reward" us for good behavior or strong faith with answered prayers. And certainly does not bring punishment because you have not been "strong enough".

And so if you feel that your prayers are unanswered — whether like Elizabeth you long for a child. Or perhaps you deeply desire healing in your body, or in a relationships. Or maybe you pray for stability and peace in your life. Your waiting is NOT a sign of your brokenness, it is NOT a sign of God's absence.... Because God is waiting alongside you.

Instead, this is part of living in a world that is broken and part of being humans with free will. God does not intervene like a genie from a lamp, as much as we wish God would. Instead, God shows up, as we will celebrate in a few weeks: in the vulnerable, the weak, the least expected.

And today, to Zechariah and Elizabeth, hear these important words from their angel:

Don't be afraid. Your prayers have been heard.

I'm sure that throughout the years, Zechariah and Elizabeth experienced what we all do: times when they felt certain in resting in hope of God's promise. And times when they wondered if God heard them at all. But here, the angel makes clear: God heard.

God had not given up on Zechariah and Elizabeth. God had not forgotten their pleas or hopes. And beloveds, God hears your prayers and longings, too.

For the last several weeks, we have been praying in worship for the people of Palestine and Israel. You've been witnessing the tragedy happening there, and praying yourselves, too. No doubt, every single person in Israel and Palestine is praying daily for relief. The photos and stories that we've seen from brave journalists, many of whom have also died, is astounding.

But just this week, we sent a check to UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief) for nearly \$10,000 that has been collected by our Messiah Church family. And I think that is a pretty incredible way God is answering prayers. The war has not stopped, and neither has the pain. But YOU have been messengers of God's love by sharing this gift.

UMCOR is using these funds for relocation support, for food and hygiene kits, and for trauma treatment for women and children, among other things. These are answered prayers, too.

Often we think of God in big and majestic, powerful ways. And it is true: God created the whole universe and everything within. Throughout scripture, we God doing some incredible things: parting seas, and healing people, and raising the dead.

And while I join you in praying for these big, audacious things to happen today - like miraculous healings or ending of century long wars. And I pray for these, even while I know that this is not the way God usually works.

Instead most often, God works in another way. A way that is smaller and quieter. And maybe a little bit ordinary.

Like transforming your dollars into food and hygiene kits. Or providing trauma counseling for children who have seen more destruction than any of us ever should.

We see this in scripture too, when God choose ordinary people again and again, to be the ones that would make way for God's kingdom and love to arrive. Instead of bringing a long awaited King to replace Herod, God gave the world a baby wrapped in cloths.

And instead of heralding his coming with trumpets and royal fanfare, God has used ordinary people to prepare the way. Like fishermen, or Shepherds, or a wandering prophet like John the Baptist.

And today, God calls Zechariah and Elizabeth. Now, they are *good*, but incredibly ordinary. They are old, and their lives have been marked by hardship. And yet, God chooses them to bring a very special boy into the world.

The angel tells them about their son, saying in verses 14-17:

You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord... He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. - Luke 1:14-17

They will be the parents of John the Baptist. They are the ones, who will raise their son to be faithful to God, to notice God in common places, to wait and to watch. They will raise him to be brave and speak out against authorities, and call people to follow God with their whole hearts.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had spent their life waiting and hoping for God to be revealed among them. And God answered them, in a most surprising way: by inviting them to be part of God's plan to save and transform the world.

If the primary invitation to us throughout advent is to prepare for God to be among us through Jesus... then the primary way we see this happening is through ordinary, unexpected people.

A people like Zechariah and Elizabeth.

A people like John the Baptist.

A people like... you and me.

The prophet Malachi said,

"I am sending my messenger, who will prepare the way before me."

In the story of scripture, John the Baptist is pointed to as the one whom God has called to prepare the world for Christ. But in the story of God among us today, YOU are the ones for whom God has called to prepare the way.

You are a messenger, *an angel*, of hope, peace, joy, and love. It is the story of your faithfulness, your waiting with longing and hope. It is through you, that your home, our community, our world is being prepared to see God revealed among us.

Welcome to advent, beloveds. This is your time to wait, prepare, and declare the presence of God among us.

Let us pray:

God of hope, thank you for your faithfulness throughout time. Help us to trust you are with us, especially in seasons of wait. Guide us to prepare our hearts and world for your presence, Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 3, 2023

Weekly Prayer

Holy God of Hope, give me ears to hear and hearts to trust the promises you offer to me in this season of Advent. I offer myself to you today, open to your abundant grace and promises of hope. Amen.

Monday, December 4

Scripture: Luke 1:5-13

During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old. One day Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. Following the customs of priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense. All the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering. An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John."

Observation: As this scripture begins, Zechariah has been chosen to enter into the Sanctuary. For Zechariah, this was a high honor that was reserved for very few – in fact, this would likely be the only time in his life that he would have the honor to perform this priestly duty. Once there, Zechariah was met by an angel who shared that he and his wife would become parents.

Application: When was the last time your life took a major turn? Perhaps it was like Zechariah, and a day you *thought* would be the best, was made even better. Or perhaps, it was a normal day, that turned into one of sorrow? Before he had any reaction, the angel said to Zechariah, "do not be afraid." I think that's because we often respond to change or the unexpected with fear. How might acknowledge any fear, but lean instead on God with trust to see you through?

Prayer: Loving God, you know how often doubt and fear tug at my heart. Send your message of hope and promise to me today, reminding me to trust and not to fear. Amen.

Tuesday, December 5

Scripture: Luke 1:13-20

The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord's eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen."

Observation: Like many women (about 1 in 4), Elizabeth struggled with fertility. I imagine she shed many tears over the years, just as many hopeful parents have done since. But now, in their "old age," an angel has told them they will have a child. Zechariah responds with a question, "How can this be?" which might be a question of doubt, hope, or both. And then the angel gave Zechariah space to wonder and reflect, by removing his ability to speak.

Application: There is a lot to unpack in just a few short verses. But first: it's okay if the longings of your heart, or grief in your life, blend doubt and hope together. If you, like Elizabeth, have had a piece of yourself that always feels to be in wait. If you, like Zechariah, have been stunned into silence by news, even if good. Doubt and hope are not a contradiction – but are evidence of an active faith present in "real life" where things are not always so cut and dry. Instead of fighting against it, how might you *sit with* your doubt and hope today? Perhaps sit with them in silence, like Zechariah, and allow your doubt and hope to speak.

Prayer: God of those with doubt, God of those with hope, draw me near to you today. Speak to me through my doubts and fears, my hopes and longings. Bring to me your comfort, Amen.

Wednesday, December 6

Scripture: Luke 1:6, 21-25

They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations.

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they wondered why he was in the sanctuary for such a long time. When he came out, he was unable to speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he gestured to them and couldn't speak. When he completed the days of his priestly service, he returned home. Afterward, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant. She kept to herself for five months, saying, "This is the Lord's doing. He has shown his favor to me by removing my disgrace among other people."

Observation: In the ancient world, it was accepted thought that the hard things in life were a result of one's worthiness or behavior – a punishment for sin. Luke stresses to us that Elizabeth and Zechariah were "righteous before God" (v6). That is, none of this is a punishment. And while today we understand that bad things in life are not punishment, nor good things in life a

reward based on something we do (or not do), we can continue to struggle with a sense of worthiness. Hear these words for you: You, beloved of God, are righteous before God.

Application: Elizabeth and Zechariah were ordinary people who loved and followed God. Through hard times and good, God was faithfully present to them just as God is present to you. Elizabeth said, “this is the Lord’s doing,” (v21) recognizing that God was present in times of struggle and times of joy. Where do you see God at work in your life today?

Prayer: Lord God, you worked out your plan through ordinary people like Zechariah and Elizabeth. That gives “ordinary me” hope. I hold myself ready for whatever you have in mind for me. Amen.

Thursday, December 7

Scripture: Genesis 21:1-7

The LORD was attentive to Sarah just as he had said, and the LORD carried out just what he had promised her. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son for Abraham when he was old, at the very time God had told him. Abraham named his son—the one Sarah bore him—Isaac. Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old just as God had commanded him. Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born. Sarah said, “God has given me laughter. Everyone who hears about it will laugh with me.” She said, “Who could have told Abraham that Sarah would nurse sons? But now I’ve given birth to a son when he was old!”

Observation: Just like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Sarah and Abraham became parents late in life. Sarah laughed at God’s promise that she’d have a son. Yet, when her child was born, she named him for the laughter God gave, calling him Isaac (in Hebrew means “laughter”). Her story reminds me of Psalm 30:5: “*Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.*”

Application: Sarah laughed initially, I suspect, in a way that said, “oh, sure!” and expressed her shock and disbelief. And yet, God was faithfully present to her, turning her disbelief into a true joyous laughter. Has God ever surprised you by how you have found comfort and hope?

Prayer: God of Hope, as we await and prepare for the presence of your Son among us once again, bring comfort to my weeping, and make a way for joy in the morning. Keep my eyes open and heart soft, that I am open to the ways you are at work in my life. Amen.

Friday, December 8

Scripture: Genesis 17: 1-8

When Abram was 99 years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am El Shaddai. Walk with me and be trustworthy. I will make a covenant between us and I will give you many, many descendants.” Abram fell on his face, and God said to him, “But me, my covenant is with you; you will be the ancestor of many nations. And because I have made you the ancestor of many nations, your name will no longer be Abram but Abraham. I will make you very fertile. I will produce nations from you, and kings will come from you. I will set up my covenant with you and your descendants after you in every generation as an enduring covenant. I will be your God and your descendants’ God after you. I will give you and your descendants the land in which you are immigrants, the whole land of Canaan, as an enduring possession. And I will be their God.”

Observation: We've backed up four chapters from yesterday, to remind ourselves of the promise God made to Abraham to make him a "great nation." In the time between, 25 years have passed! Not all of them included Abraham waiting patiently, but through it all, God was faithful.

Application: Are there dreams for your life, or divine promises you are waiting for? Does it feel as if 25 years have passed without response? I wonder how we might look to Abraham & Sarah, Zechariah & Elizabeth for encouragement for these times?

Prayer: God of hope, thank you for ancestors of faith who remind me that I am not alone in times of longing, waiting, and hoping. Help me trust that just as you have been faithful to them, you are faithful to me. Amen.

Saturday, December 9

Scripture: Luke 1:39-45

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

Observation: We'll close our week as we began: in the presence of Elizabeth. In this passage (one of my most favorites), Elizabeth greets a young Mary, who is just at the beginning of her own journey of surprise and hope. Elizabeth's voice rings with confidence and joy and she becomes the first person to call Jesus "Lord" -- even before he is born! In doing so, she brings much needed comfort and companionship to Mary.

Application: In these weeks ahead of our celebration of Jesus birth: where do you see, sing, and proclaim Jesus *your* Lord? How has Jesus changed your life?

Prayer: O God, keep reminding me that you kept your promises to Elizabeth, just as you keep promises today. Give me opportunities to share your joy and love with others as Elizabeth gave to Mary. Amen.