

December 24th: Prepare

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” Over the course of the year, we’ll read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone.

Before we dig in, let’s pray together.

Long Awaited Messiah,

As we wait for you to make your arrival, we are preparing our homes, preparing our gifts, preparing our meals, preparing our sanctuary, but most of all, we are preparing our hearts for your divine presence. We anticipate the moment of your birth because we know that this is a moment when heaven and earth have finally come together. Our souls are ready to receive you, we open our doors, our minds,

our whole selves to you, we long to draw near to you. We listen for your cry, and look for the star, so that we can come and worship you as our Savior and King. In your holy name we pray, Amen.

Our final Advent passage comes from the New Testament, from the time of the first century BCE. After generations in exile, and generations more back in the land of Israel, God's people are once again under foreign occupation—this time by the Roman Empire. This powerful force has swept through the Mediterranean world, and now all of the Jews are living in their homeland as marginalized people. For some, this is a time of flourishing—with great thinkers and great theologians and great teachers. But for others, this is a time of devastation—heavy taxes and heavy burdens of war, destruction, and poverty. It is during this period that Judaism blossoms into a religion with a formal set of scriptures, but it's also the time when Jewish people begin to divide themselves up into various sects and distinct groups that operate with different values and perspectives. Under the leadership of the Pharisees it's a time of spiritual revival, but it's also a time of increasingly restrictive laws and control.

Into this complicated context, our gospel author speaks.

I'm not going to get into the details of Luke's gospel at this particular moment, as that deserves a much longer discussion—but I will say that this story that we read this morning is unique to this book—no other gospel writer or biblical author includes this narrative in their version of events. Luke makes a deliberate choice to record it in his account, and I'm glad he did, because there's a very special connection between the origin story of John the Baptist, and the story that we will hear tonight about the birth of Jesus.

That passage begins with this introduction: "In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly."

So right off the bat, we hear that there's this couple who can trace their ancestry back to the time of slavery in Egypt—they are deeply connected to this story of the Promised Land, the exile in Babylon, and the many challenges that God's people have faced along the way. Their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and many generations beyond that have all been part of this lineage of protection and faithfulness.

We learn in verse 7, that Zechariah and Elizabeth are not able to have a child of their own, and like their ancient family members Abraham and Sarah, have reached old age. Nevertheless, God has a plan for them, and a specific message for their future. One day, when Zechariah is on duty lighting incense in the inner sanctum of the temple, an angel of the Lord appears to him, and Zechariah is afraid.

Luke records that the angel shares this announcement: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; 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 many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 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 turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

I can imagine that Zechariah is both confused and overjoyed by this prophecy of a future son. They have struggled to bear children, and the promise of a beloved child, a long-awaited infant, surely fills Zechariah's heart with gratitude and happiness. But also, this is a strange message to give a priest, don't you think? Zechariah is part of the religious elite—the people who have the power to communicate with God and intercede on behalf of the people—and he is one of the leaders who is supposed to be bringing people

into a loving and faithful relationship with God. And he's hearing that this promised son will also do that—but from a very different position.

This future son will not be a priest, but a prophet—one who doesn't speak from temples, but from the wilderness. His voice will not be one of institutional power; instead he will be equipped with divine authority.

A priest like Zechariah operates on the inside of the religious leadership—mainly concerned with the preservation of human structures and the status quo. A priest operates in ways that protect against outside influence. However, a prophet operates from outside of that structure—and is mainly concerned with the transformation of the entire system and all the people in it. Zechariah's son will lead people in a new way, preparing them for something more revolutionary and more cosmic.

So while the birth of this child may be a gift, it is also subversive in a way. It subverts the expectations of Zechariah's clan, it subverts the power dynamics of the day, it subverts how people are supposed to act in relationship to God. I think this is why John is such a powerful precursor to Jesus—because John is ready for a future in which everything is turned upside down and everything is transformed.

But before we celebrate Jesus' arrival this evening, I do have a word for us this morning. As you might expect, our verb for today is: to prepare.

I'm sure that everyone in this room is no stranger to this particular verb, especially in light of tonight's service and tomorrow's celebration. I'm sure almost all of us have been doing some kind of preparation for these big moments—some of us preparing food, some of us preparing gifts for underneath the tree, some of us preparing a plate of cookies to be ready for Santa, some of us preparing a guest room for loved ones, some of preparing a dining table with all the necessary settings, some of preparing a warm drink for a cozy night by the fireplace. All of these preparations are meaningful in their own way, and all of these preparations are part of the magic of this season. All of these preparations are work that contributes to some kind of

experience, some kind of special moment. We may even be daunted by the sheer number of preparations that need to be made, or overwhelmed by a to-do list that seems to grow longer and longer each year.

I totally get it.

There are so many things to do in order to get ready for this special moment. However, in the hustle and bustle of it all, we might miss out on the fact that this holiday isn't about the presents, or the family photos, or the decorations, or even the fancy meal—it's about a baby who was born for a revolutionary purpose. It's about an infant who comes to transform our hearts and our world.

And so, I want us to direct our attention back to this passage about Zechariah and the son that he was promised. I want us to listen to this story about future transformation and ask: what does it mean to be “a people prepared for the Lord?” What does it mean for us—our hearts, our souls—to be the things that are prepared, instead of the ones doing the preparing?

The angel's prophecy says that Zechariah's prophetic son will be the one who leads people towards repentance, he will be the one who turns the people back to God, and away from disobedience. So it might not sound very glamorous, or feel very Christmas-y, but our real work in this season is to open ourselves to this movement that John started and Jesus completed.

So we might ask ourselves: as God's people, as this family of believers, as a congregation, and as individuals of faith—

Are we prepared to admit the ways that we've fallen short?

Are we prepared to heal the broken relationships and fractured communities that we've created?

Are we prepared to labor for peace, even if it puts us right in the middle of conflict?

Are we prepared to examine our sense of indifference to injustice?

Are we prepared to abandon our all consuming lust for power?
Are we prepared to give up our greed, and the incessant need to acquire more and more, while others suffer with less and less?
Are we prepared to let go of stubborn pride?
Are we prepared to discard old grudges that have hardened our hearts?
Are we prepared to confess the idols that our hearts are holding onto in the hopes that they will save us?

Are we prepared to change our behavior and the ways that we interact with others on a daily basis?
Are we prepared to realign ourselves with God's priorities instead of our human ones?
Are we prepared to act with compassion towards the vulnerable?
Are we prepared to respond to God's call with obedience instead of apathy?
Are we prepared to dismantle systems and structures that only serve to protect the status quo?
Are we prepared to speak out in support of the oppressed and the marginalized?
Are we prepared to give our lives for something greater than ourselves?

My friends, Zechariah's prophetic son asks us—are we ready to be radically transformed? Are we ready for a revolutionary new Kingdom?

Because this is what it means to be prepared for the Lord. Not parties, or place settings, but true peace and true restoration. Not stockings hung by the fire with care or packages tied up with string, but eternal justice and eternal wholeness.

Our prophet John goes ahead of us, leading us towards Jesus. The good news is here: prepare the way for the Lord.

Amen.