

2nd SUNDAY OF ADVENT
December 9, 2019

Text: Luke 1:68-79

Theme: Zechariah

Jesus is coming and we are the people who wait for him. At the time of the Second Advent all things present will pass away and in its place God promises to make all things new. Jesus tells us that no one will know the day or the hour of his arrival so our Lord commands us to be watchful and to stay awake and to be prepared.

But how shall we prepare?

We prepare by meditating on his first coming – for though the future may be hidden from us the past is not, and the one can teach us the other. In two weeks we will hear again the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. But today we are privy to a spiritual and holy account of the time when God himself started to direct all the preparations necessary for that first coming of his Son into the world. It is these preparations that help us know how we are to be prepared for what is yet to come. And today our lessons center on a man named Zechariah.

Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, are introduced to us as a faithful couple. Both of them come from good and solid backgrounds. His family tree has roots that go all the way back to Aaron and she is also a descendant of the Levites. Both are considered righteous in the eyes of God. All their lives they have been obedient to the Jewish laws and the commandments. And Zechariah is a priest. He has dedicated his life to being a servant of our Lord.

As we count the days until Christmas we learn that this is the man and woman God has chosen to bear the prophet, John, who is the forerunner to Jesus. God normally chooses the least likely candidates to participate in his plan of salvation but this time Zechariah seems like a perfect match. Even his name has significance as it means *the Lord remembers*. God is remembering the prayer of this old priest and God is remembering his people. Centuries before God remembered Sarah and Abraham who had a child in their old age and with it came a promise – in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. And now we hear a covenant of grace spoken to Zechariah.

On our Sundays in Advent we never hear the entire story of how this promise came to be but we read it this past week for our midweek services. The lesson was from Luke 1:5-24. It is a powerful account of how Zechariah learned what God had in mind for him and on Tuesday (in my excitement over the intricate way Scripture is woven) I went verse by verse to demonstrate that God does not leave anything to chance. And one thing I did not mention I share with you now.

As a priest Zechariah got up every morning with the other priests to cast lots to see who would serve in one of four capacities. One would offer the burnt offering, one would offer the meal offering, one would care for the candlesticks in the sanctuary, and one would offer incense. No priest (having offered incense once) could do it again. Zechariah had never done it before and on this one morning the lot fell to him. On this day he was called to one of the highest honors of his professional life. It would be his first time and the last time.

While in the temple (just as the incense touched the coals) the angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah. Can you imagine his surprise? It does not matter how faithful we are our immediate reaction would be to doubt and to be afraid and to have a whole lot of questions. But before Zechariah has a chance to speak the angel calls him by name and announces that his prayers have been answered. Another big surprise! You, Zechariah, and your beloved wife will bear a son even though you are really, really old. And you are to name him John that means *the Lord has given grace*.

And still Zechariah cannot respond as the angel of the Lord keeps talking. Oh, the two of you will be so happy and all your friends and family will be so excited for you. The Lord will take a special interest in your son so make sure he does not drink wine or other libations. The Holy Spirit will come upon him even before he is born and just like the prophet Elijah he will turn the hearts of the people to the Lord. He is the one who will prepare everyone for the coming of the Messiah. It is time. God is breaking into the world and your son is going to be the forerunner! What do you think?

Poor Zechariah can only respond in one way. We are too old. We did not see this coming and we are ill-prepared ... too old to bear a child, too old to raise a toddler let alone a teenager, too old to be the ones by which the Messiah will come. How will we know?

And the angel responds: Well you will know when your wife starts to show visibly that she has a child within her. And because you doubt you will be unable to speak a single word until it comes time for your son to be born. It will give you plenty of time to reflect on my words that come directly from God.

Zechariah leaves the temple and heads home. We assume Elizabeth has a normal pregnancy so for nine months her husband ponders the words of the angel. And when the child is born and Zechariah can finally speak again he does so filled with the Holy Spirit. He bursts out in a song of praise to God who has not only looked with favor upon him and his wife but upon all the people of Israel. In his song of praise he exalts the God who is coming with strength and power. God is coming to save us. God is coming to show us his mercy. God is coming to give us courage to serve him with awe and in all holiness.

And when Zechariah holds his newborn son then in his song of praise we hear his joy in holding a prophet of the Most High. Zechariah will not be able to keep him home forever as John will need to leave to prepare the way for the Lord. But the grumpy old priest has been transformed by the miracle he holds. Alone with his thoughts he is led to profound changes in his faith. Maybe during those nine months he reread the scrolls and meditated day and night on what God was about to do. We have no idea what those nine months were like for him except what we experience now. He just bubbles over with joy. Zechariah literally sings!

We know the *Song of Hannah* found in the Old Testament that was offered at the birth of her son, Samuel. Mary echoes her words when she learns she will bear a child named Jesus. But here we have the heartwarming words of a father who conveys in his own way a sense of wonder at the tender mercies of God ... and that he has a part in it. He who once was put into silence because of his unbelief now basks in the forgiveness and love and grace of God.

Jesus is coming but how shall we prepare? We prepare by remaining faithful to God who makes us righteous in his eyes and we do not stop until the time we take our last breath. We prepare by remaining obedient to his will and to his commandments. We stand vigilant and ready for when God will present himself to us. We listen for his voice so we know what God asks of us.

It was no coincidence that Zechariah was in that temple on that day to offer the incense (a once in a lifetime opportunity). It will not be a coincidence when we are called to serve in any capacity for our Lord. God will work through our doubts and fears. He will satisfy all of our questions. And God will give us the time we need to reflect on what we have heard from our Lord.

As we prepare for the Second Advent when Christ will come in all his glory, we become his forerunners: Be the ones to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. Be the ones to guide the feet of those who want peace. Be the ones to prepare the way for the Lord. And remember to point everything to God who is preparing to break into our world. Amen