



Prepare the Way for the Lord

Week 1: Predictions

Lori Lampert - 11/27/2022

We are blessed with an incredible amount of technology that helps us prepare for events in the world. How many of us have weather apps on our phones? I use the Weather Channel app, and I like that I have access to the same radar that meteorologists have. My ego then lets me think I understand how to interpret what I am seeing. When our family was in Florida at the end of September for my mother-in-law's 90th birthday, we knew that Hurricane Ian was on the way.

When the COVID-19 virus first made its way to the United States, we could track its spread on the Centers for Disease Control website. And I did. From the west coast to the east coast, we were able to watch as it spread from person to person, state to state, county to county and ultimately we had our first case in our community. Like an approaching hurricane, we shut the doors and became the most concerned for our safety, worried about how to protect our families and friends from impending danger. We have a way to prepare for it now, but it still comes.

Even before technology gave us satellites and mobile phones and such, The Old Farmer's Almanac advised (and still advises) farmers and gardeners of when the frost would likely pass, and come again, and when to plant what crops for best results. We like to know what's coming, and humans have been that way for a long, long time.

Advent. The word comes from the Latin *adventus* and means coming, arrival. Like the technology of today, this season is one meant to prepare us for something that will change our lives. It heralds the coming of Immanuel, God with us. Rather than hunker down, bar the doors and windows, and protect ourselves, we do just the opposite. The celebration of the birth of Jesus invites us to prepare by opening our hearts, throwing wide the doors, stepping boldly outside the walls of this sanctuary and our homes to engage the world.

Everything we are doing at The Downtown Church during the month of Advent is our way of intentionally preparing the way for the Lord to enter in our lives anew.

There is one person in Holy Scripture that all four of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—agree was born specifically to prepare the way of the Lord. Literally. His call, his very purpose, was to be a messenger. We know him as John the Baptist.

Each of the Gospels introduce John before writing about Jesus' public ministry. His story is intricately woven with God's story of redemption, repentance, and forgiveness through Jesus. And in both worship and the Sunday morning classes, or that I will begin this Wednesday at 6:30, we will look at how learning more deeply about the life of John helps us to follow Jesus. For that is the reason we celebrate this season. We are here to live and love like Jesus. You and I, ordinary people, are able to become extraordinary as we align our lives with the Messiah, the Christ, Immanuel, God with us, Jesus Christ.

We begin today with an ordinary priest, named Zechariah, and his wife Elizabeth, the mother and father of John, and their story found in the first chapter of the gospel of Luke. Their story is a familiar one in scripture. It hearkens back to the beginning of the story of Abraham and Sarah found in Genesis. The author of Luke asks us to remember the beginning story of God

establishing a relationship with God's people. A time when God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their homeland and go to a place unknown to them. A time when God promised them a child, even though they were far beyond childbearing years. Abraham was 100, Sarah the same age as my mother-in-law, 90.

It is the story of the continuity and faithfulness of God, the story of God choosing unexpected people to do extraordinary things.

And now, generations later, another couple who are old and childless will be used by God for an extraordinary purpose. They are described as righteous, living blamelessly. At a time when infertility was considered something done by God to people, Luke lets us know that God is not the cause of their lack of children.

This is important to note before we go any further. Far too often the God of love, mercy, grace and justice is blamed for what happens in our human, fragile bodies. Bodies that bend and break. Bodies that at times can now be repaired and healed through the gift of science. And I do absolutely believe at times, although rarely, in miraculous interventions directly by God such as happened to Sarah and Elizabeth. So we will pray. Faithfully. Always.

We pray to align our will with God's. We pray with thanksgiving and praise for who God is the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of life. We pray for God to lead us, guide us, forgive us. We pray to open ourselves for God to use in this world and that we would have the courage to move forward. We pray because we are called to be in relationship with the Lord God Almighty. And we pray understanding that God moves most often through the work of others, through the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

I agree with Adam Hamilton who writes: **It is important to recognize that God's primary way of working in our world is not to suspend the laws of nature to answer our prayers through miraculous intervention. God's primary way of working is through the laws God has established,**

through the care of others, and through the strength and guidance God gives by the Spirit.

This week I prayed with others as a baby was brought into the world a few weeks early. His mother and he were in danger, and because of excellent care and technology they knew when it was time to deliver him. I prayed with others as the son of one of our members was hospitalized in excruciating pain and needed immediate surgical intervention to save his life.

I prayed for a person traveling to receive care in another state that gives him hope. I prayed for the daughter of a member of our church who is still awaiting a diagnosis and plan for her future. And I prayed for those who are experiencing their first Thanksgiving with an empty chair that should have their loved one sitting in it, laughing with them. For those who have been gifted with a turkey but have no way to cook it. For those in Ukraine who are now facing a winter without power, with bombs bursting, with food scarce.

Sometimes we see the answer to our prayer. Sometimes it feels as if we are not heard. Sometimes we will not see the answer on this side of heaven. Yet, always God will answer. So we will pray. Expectantly, faithfully, persistently.

From Luke 1 we read:

⁵ In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Zechariah and Elizabeth lived outside of Jerusalem. Tradition has it that they lived in a small town Ein Karem, not far from Jerusalem's temple. That would have been where Zechariah served as the parish priest for his community. He belonged to one of the 24 divisions of priests.

All the priests would gather in Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts: Passover, Purim to name a few. But usually, on all the other days of the year, each division shared the responsibility of tending to the ordinances and laws of temple worship for two weeks. The roles to fulfill were specific, and they rotated among the priests of each division.

This time it is Zechariah who is chosen to enter into the temple, the center of worship for all Judaism, to burn incense on the golden altar. It is an honor that may only fall on him once in his lifetime. Yet it is nothing compared to the honor that awaits him.

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. ¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ With 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."

The promise to Abraham and Sarah, made generations ago, is coming to fulfillment in Zechariah and Elizabeth. It begins in this holy space, before this altar, with an angel speaking to this ordinary priest. It begins with a promise of a miraculous birth. God's covenant relationship with Israel has been through so very much. Too many battles and wars to count. Captivity and the destruction of the temple. A rebuilding and restoration of what was lost only to be oppressed now by the Romans and a dangerous leader like Herod on the throne.

Against all odds, God is being faithful to come. To redeem. To bring salvation to the people and world God loves. To answer the prayer of generations. God enters into this time and place with the birth of two babies. A messenger is born to Elizabeth who has been barren all her life. A savior is born to Mary who is only just beginning to know what it means to be a woman. Two babies. An experience that happens everyday and yet one that God makes extraordinary.

As we prepare for Advent, let's acknowledge that there are times in our lives, even when we feel we are living blameless and righteous lives, when it seems like we have hit a dead end. When we are weary beyond measure. When we are frustrated with circumstances being beyond our control. When we doubt God's goodness. When we have decorated for Christmas but we wonder what difference it makes. We have lists of presents to buy, places to go, things to do. It is as if we see hurricane Ian on the radar and we would prefer to hunker down.

But the stories of Abraham and Sarah, and of Zechariah and Elizabeth, are stories of the God for whom there are no dead ends. Ever. There are detours, and road blocks; there are stairs to climb and altars to approach. But there are no dead ends. Ever. There are delays, there are flooded roads, and downed trees. There are even viruses to come. Yet, God opens up a way where there seems to be no way.

Prepare the way for the Lord. Look at your radar. Where are the roadblocks? Are there people it is time to forgive, who have taken up enough of your energy, and it is time to move forward?

Do you find yourself unable to get beyond the barrenness of your own life, the emptiness you feel like a giant tree before you? Look to your right: there is an angel there beckoning you over to another way. There are people who need what you can offer, regardless of your age or your circumstances. There is a way forward.

Find ways to be generous, share what God has entrusted to you. Remember to put aside resources for our Christmas Eve offering. Pick up something off the display for vulnerable youth in our community. Lift people in prayer who you will never meet. Write the note, make the call, send the text, reach out with compassion and empathy. Come before the altar in worship and acknowledge the majesty of God with gratitude.

Get ready. Prepare the way for the Lord. The story continues. Abraham and Sarah. Elizabeth and Zechariah. Mary and Joseph. You and me.