

We're starting a new sermon series today for the season of Advent. Advent is the season in the Christian calendar when we take four weeks to journey towards the Great Light that came at Christmas, the light in the darkness, the hope for the whole world, the coming of our Saviour.

And so Advent is often when we enter into the hopeful and yet also sometimes discouraged hearts of those who were waiting for Christ to come in the first place—*so that* we can increase our own gratitude for Christ's incarnation—His coming *to* us—and remind ourselves that He's coming again.

And to do that this Advent, we're looking at the Biblical figure who I believe is actually the key player in the whole story leading up to Christ's birth, the one figure who actually makes it all happen.

The Holy Spirit. And my hope is that—as we look at the work of the Spirit and the presence of the Spirit in this first Christmas story, that we can be a bit more mindful to look for the presence of the Spirit in our day-to-day celebrations as well.

Because that term, 'the spirit of Christmas,' gets thrown out a lot. Where's your holiday spirit? I want to do all these things—go shopping, set up a tree, buy a peppermint mocha, whatever—so that I can get into the Christmas spirit. Ooo, all the lights and decorations and holiday movies are getting me into the Christmas spirit.

It's a strange phrase—actually—because it's not referring to a spirit at all but rather a disposition, a feeling, a sense of excitement. A mood, really, that can come or go depending on the situation.

So what if our goal, then—or our main hope this Christmas season—was to get wrapped up in the true Spirit of Christmas? The Spirit who isn't a feeling or a mood or something that we can manufacture but a Divine Person who stewards this season for us?

Because that's what He did from the very beginning. He directed it all. This season *belongs to Him*.

And so every time we string up lights or set up a tree and experience joy and delight, perhaps it's to *Him* that we should be giving the credit?

Honestly, how would it reshape the way that we even approach this season if we were to discipline ourselves to see that Advent is about joining in with what the Spirit is already up to? That there's actually a missional element to this season in that we are looking for what the Spirit is doing not just in our own lives but in the lives of others who perhaps don't yet know the incarnate Jesus as we do?

We'll chat more about this later, but that's what I want us to do as we explore this first chapter of Luke over the next four weeks. For many of us these are very familiar passages, but we're going to look specifically at what the Holy Spirit is doing. And that will then give us a framework for keeping our eyes open to what the Spirit is doing still today.

## Read Luke 1:5-25.

Okay, so what is the Holy Spirit doing in this passage, and why does it matter? Like I said earlier, this is where I want us ultimately to focus. But before we get there, we have to look at the situation that we've been presented with, the context that the Holy Spirit is speaking into.

Elizabeth and Zechariah are both priestly individuals. They both come from a lineage of priests and are descendants of Aaron.

*And*, according to v. 6, they aren't just righteous in name but also in practice. We could say that they too had a Beatitude legacy before the Beatitudes were a thing. They foreshadowed Christ's Kingdom in that they hungered and thirsted for righteousness.

But there's a problem. Verse 7 makes that very clear and doesn't skimp on words. *"...they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old."*

Now, we talked about this a few weeks ago when we looked at the story of Hannah. Here is another woman—Elizabeth—who has spent her entire life struggling with infertility and understanding that the problem was her, because that's how the ancient world thought.

Verse 25 alludes to the reality that Elizabeth was disgraced among the people. So how many prayers do you think Elizabeth offered over the course of her life? How many times did she read the story of Hannah and think, "Oh, if only you would treat me and see me like you did Hannah. You gave her a son; why not me?" Painful stuff.

But Elizabeth is now beyond the point of even being able to conceive and bear children. Because verse 7 doesn't just say that she and her husband were a little bit over the age limit.

They were both very old, the text says.

Now, just for comparison's sake, when I was pregnant with Elijah, I was 36 and technically was called a geriatric pregnancy, which literally means 'old pregnancy.' Very flattering.

Elizabeth is *very* old. Like, this can even happen anymore, very old.

But wait. We've seen this before in Scripture. Because there's definitely another couple in Scripture who were in a very similar situation. Both very old and unable to bear children. Do you remember?

Abraham and Sarah. At the time when God was making His covenant with Abraham, promising that He will be with Abraham, He brought a child out of an impossible situation.

And now here, at the very beginning of Luke, He's doing another new thing that looks very similar. He's bringing the promise of a new covenant—the 'good news' that the angel speaks of—through a child that is born out of an impossible situation.

A child who will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

And look at how this all got orchestrated. Zechariah was one of thousands of priests, and each division of priests only got so many opportunities to serve in the Jerusalem temple. Even then, only *one* priest got chosen by lot to actually go inside.

Zechariah gets chosen. And Gabriel's waiting for him. Waiting inside. Waiting to tell him, "Don't be afraid. There are times when it is appropriate to be afraid, but not right now. This is not the moment for fear."

Why? Because, v. 13, your prayers have been heard.

How many of us today—how many people in the world today—wish that they could hear those words spoken over them? Your prayers have been heard. Whatever your deepest ache is, God has heard you. He's been listening, even though it hasn't always felt like it.

Last week Danny took us through that passage in Daniel chapter 9 where Daniel pleads with the Lord to listen. "*Lord, listen. Lord, forgive. Lord, hear and act!*"

In other words, Lord, assure me that my prayers are *doing something*. Give me evidence that you're actually hearing me. I've been praying and waiting, and it's starting to feel like I'm just talking to myself.

I recently spoke with a couple who—a few years ago—found Jesus and converted to the Christian faith, which is wonderful. But it was difficult for them to look back on their lives and wonder why God's Spirit hadn't intervened earlier.

Like, where were you, God, ten years ago when I sold my soul to my career, they said. When I chose status over family? When I was so blinded by ambition that I couldn't actually see you?

I think we've all had those moments of asking God, "Lord, where were you? Why the delay?"

Elizabeth and Zechariah, similarly, would have been exhausted from years of praying and waiting. Years of discouragement. Years of shame.

Years of resigning themselves to a fate that they never anticipated, to a life that they never hoped for, and an emptiness that they never wanted or expected.

And when I picture Zechariah going into the temple to offer incense and prayers, I imagine him reciting words like the words in a recent song by Matt Papa and Matt Boswell, based on Psalm 42:

Lord, from sorrows deep I call  
When my hope is shaken  
Torn and ruined from the fall  
Hear my desperation  
For so long I've pled and prayed  
God come to my rescue  
Even so the thorn remains  
Still my heart will praise You

I feel like that's the tone Zechariah's prayer could have had, when he walked into the holy place in the Temple, when he finally had an audience with God.

But not to pray for his own personal problems, just to be clear.

See, because by this point, God hadn't just seemed absent from Zechariah and Elizabeth. He had been silent for 400-some-odd years. No prophets. No written prophecies. No sense of direction or of God doing anything. No clear indication that God was anywhere nearby.

*Everyone*, in other words, was feeling the absence and the silence of God.

And so Zechariah's own personal suffering—and the silence of God in their own personal lives—would have been seen within the greater context of the suffering of their people.

Zechariah, in this once-in-a-lifetime moment in the holy of holies, would have probably been praying that God would speak and do something, not just for himself, but for all the people.

And so the answer, then, to Zechariah's prayer is that God's voice is finally being heard after 400 years of silence with an angel is declaring through a temple megaphone, "God *is now* doing something. And He's doing it in His timing, with the people that He has chosen, for the sake of His coming Messiah, through the work of His Holy Spirit.

Verse 14: the angel is speaking here about the child to be born, the prophet 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."*

Beautiful. But what really makes this child so significant? *"...he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born."*

Wait, what? “He will be filled with the Holy Spirit before he is even born.”

Before he’s even born? Like, in the womb? I’m sorry, that doesn’t fit into my theological categories. That boy needs to get baptized before he gets the Holy Spirit. He needs to have an *encounter* with the Spirit. He needs to understand what Jesus has done for him. He can’t just “have” the Holy Spirit.

To be filled by the Holy Spirit as an adult is one thing. We’ve seen that before. Elijah and Elisha, for instance. Prophets in the old testament. Others because of the task or role that they were given.

John, too, will have a prophetic and priestly kind of task. But this is something totally new.

It seems to be the case, now, with the reality of Christ coming, that the Holy Spirit is moving and filling more than ever before. And can do whatever He wants. The Holy Spirit can anoint whomever He wants. The Holy Spirit can fill and be present with whomever the Holy Spirit wants.

Including even, yes, a baby in his mother’s womb. A child that cannot even breath on his own, think for himself, or make any decisions for himself, but already has the presence of the Holy Spirit.

You know, I must admit, this is one of the things I love about being in the Reformed tradition. Because we practice the baptism of children; infant baptism, as we call it.

But that’s actually a bit of a misnomer, because it actually has nothing to do with the baptized individual being an infant, but rather that that child has already received grace in that they are being nurtured to know Jesus and to know the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Because it’s the Holy Spirit who reveals Jesus to us.

And if the Holy Spirit can be with John in the womb, surely He can be with a child already born.

When the Holy Spirit has a plan for your life, it doesn’t matter how old you are. John the Baptist had the Holy Spirit active within him before he even knew that the Spirit existed.

Because when God wants to do something, His Spirit makes sure that it happens.

And John could only fulfil the task God had for him and prepare the way for the coming of Christ *because* He was filled with the Spirit.

Which means that Zechariah’s prayer is answered and fulfilled not just because the Lord has said that He is coming, and not just because the Lord has said that Zechariah’s soon-to-be-born son will announce that He is coming, but because this soon-to-be-born son will announce the Lord’s coming *because* the very presence of this Lord is within him.

The answer to Zechariah's prayer is fulfilled in the work of the Holy Spirit who prepares John to prepare the way for Jesus.

And friends, I am convinced that this Spirit wants to do the same with you and I today. So often, we approach Advent in such a way that *we* end up being the main focus. *We* need to prepare our hearts for Christ's coming. *We* need to attend all the appropriate gatherings. *We* need to sing the songs and get in the 'mood' and fa-la-la-la-la until we're ready for Boxing Day.

But this first chapter of Luke really challenges us to consider if we might be missing the point. Because the good news given to Zechariah and Elizabeth wasn't that the Lord was coming and therefore they and their newborn son would need to prepare *themselves*.

The good news was that the Lord was coming, and therefore they and their newborn son needed to prepare the hearts of *others* for that coming. To make ready *a people* prepared for the Lord.

I wonder if, for all of us today, our task as well in Advent is to make ready *a people* prepared for the Lord? To be filled by the same Spirit that filled John and prepare, not just ourselves, but *others* for Christ's coming?

What does that mean? Well, it means that we need to think about this season very differently.

Because we too now—in Christ—have a priestly and prophetic task to place our prayers in the greater longing that we have to see Jesus now return to His Temple and fill this world and be Lord over it, and seek such a filling of the Holy Spirit so that we too can prepare others *for* His coming.

Because His coming is good news. The fact that Jesus came 2000 years ago in the flesh changed everything.

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;  
hail th'incarnate Deity,  
pleased with us in flesh to dwell,  
Jesus, our Immanuel.

In Jesus, God did something that forever changed the way that we would interact with and hear from Him. In Jesus, God proved that His greatest desire is to dwell among us, to be with us, to be in the same vicinity as us. That's what He wants.

And so maybe this Advent, we need to resist focusing on ourselves so much and instead let our agendas and minds be silenced, as Zechariah was. Because it's actually a time to listen and to watch. To see what God is up to.

Because He *is* doing something. He *has* come, and He is answering our prayers. His Spirit is here.

The same Spirit who conceived Christ within the womb of Mary and who rose Him from the dead. That Spirit is moving today. Within you, within this place, and within the lives of others who are seeking the Christ in Christmas without even realizing it.

So many people love this time of year but don't really understand why. So many people in our neighbourhoods and workplaces celebrate this time of year but don't understand why.

And so if God has in fact done something incredible, and is still moving and doing things now and wants to do those things through *you*, then I want to encourage you this season to ask Him *daily* to open your eyes to His Holy Spirit—to the true Spirit of Christmas.

Because I'm starting to think, more and more, that living as prophets and priests necessitates having a sacramental curiosity that seeks to see the sacred intersecting with the ordinary.

For example, when you are putting up Christmas lights, sending out greeting cards, wrapping a gift that you're eager to give to someone, driving in the dark and feeling uplifted by the lit-up streets and coloured banners—what is the Spirit of Christmas saying through the seasonal joy and delight?

Or in the moments when you feel the grief and the loss of unexpected emptiness, when your prayers seem to be bouncing off walls and creating an echo in your own home, where might the Spirit of Christmas be leading you to place that ache?

In a season that is so prone to distraction and consumption and forgetting the main thing, it is the Spirit who reminds us that Christ is near. It is the Spirit who has not left you alone because He's been with you probably longer than you realize.

It is the Spirit who wants to use you to make ready a whole people prepared for Christ's coming.

This Advent, be filled by the true Spirit of Christmas. And let your hearts prepare for the coming of the King.