

The Embodiment of Hope

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in the four-part Advent Series

December 1, 2013

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Luke 1:39–45 (Common English Bible)

³⁹ Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. ⁴⁰ She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. ⁴³ Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. ⁴⁵ Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

Luke 1:57–80 (Common English Bible)

⁵⁷ When the time came for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her because they had heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy. ⁵⁹ On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. They wanted to name him Zechariah because that was his father's name. ⁶⁰ But his mother replied, "No, his name will be John."

⁶¹ They said to her, "None of your relatives have that name." ⁶² Then they began gesturing to his father to see what he wanted to call him.

⁶³ After asking for a tablet, he surprised everyone by writing, "His name is John." ⁶⁴ At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he began praising God.

⁶⁵ All their neighbors were filled with awe, and everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened. ⁶⁶ All who heard about this considered it carefully. They said, "What then will this child be?" Indeed, the Lord's power was with him.

⁶⁷ John's father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,

⁶⁸ "Bless the Lord God of Israel
because he has come to help
and has delivered his people.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in his servant David's house,

⁷⁰ just as he said through the mouths
of his holy prophets long ago. . . .

⁷⁶ You, child, will be called a prophet
of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord
to prepare his way.

⁷⁷ You will tell his people how to be saved
through the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ Because of our God's deep compassion,
the dawn from heaven
will break upon us,

⁷⁹ to give light to those
who are sitting in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide us on the path of peace."

⁸⁰ The child grew up, becoming strong in character. He was in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.

One story. Many perspectives. Many vantage points.

What is your reaction to the coming of the king?

Every story can be told from several vantage points; the Christmas story is no different. Every participant in this remarkable story would tell it differently; each anticipates and experiences the birth of the Christ-child from their own perspective, their individual hopes, fears, and experiences. In this Advent series, we will strive to see the story from the vantage points of four key and dramatically diverse men: John the Baptizer, Herod the Great, Joseph, and Simeon. We'll learn that the birth of Jesus engenders every emotion from rapture to terror. It all depends on your vantage point.

A baby is born (the other one)

The temple in Jerusalem was the workplace of the priests of Israel, who managed a priestly system built around animal sacrifice. In the busy festivals of the Jewish year, the Jerusalem priests had their hands full, literally, keeping up with the demands of the populace. Somewhere around 6-4 BC, one of the priests was a very old man named Zechariah who was married to an equally old woman named Elizabeth. Much to their disappointment, the old couple was childless.

One day, as Zechariah's department was fulfilling its priestly duties, the old man was chosen to enter God's sanctuary and offer up incense.¹ This was quite an honor for Zechariah and something that he may have waited for his whole life.

Alone inside the sanctuary and somewhere during the middle of the ritual, the divine burst in upon Zechariah and all thoughts of the sacred ceremony were set aside. Gabriel, an angel of the LORD, stood on the right side of the altar. Zechariah was terrified. As was the necessary custom among angels, Gabriel told the old man, "Don't be afraid." Zechariah's prayers were about to be answered.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had always strived to lead holy and righteous lives. Not only was Zechariah a temple priest, Elizabeth was a descendent of Aaron, brother of Moses and the first high priest of Israel. But still, their lives have been clouded by the sadness and even disgrace of childlessness. This would have fallen especially hard on Elizabeth, as, in their world, a woman's barrenness was seen to be a reproach from God. Now, they were too old for there to be any possibility of a child.

The Birth of John the Baptizer

By the time that Gabriel interrupts Zechariah's incense offering, the Jews had waited hundreds of years for the arrival of their deliverer, their Messiah. Surely, many Jews had given up hope that they would ever see the decisive acts of God. Similarly, Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up hope of ever having children. But just as God burst in upon their lives, giving them a son, God would soon end the Jews' wait and burst in upon human history, bringing it to a climax in Jesus Christ.

Just as the announcement of John's birth precedes the announcement of his cousin's birth, so Luke tells of us John's birth before he tells us the story of Jesus' birth (see Luke 1:57-80).

When Elizabeth's baby is born, the neighbors are overjoyed. At the infant's circumcision ceremony, he is about to be named Zechariah, after his father, when Elizabeth announces that he is to be named John. Zechariah agrees to the naming and, at that moment, his speech is restored! The story is told throughout the area causing people to wonder, "What then is this child going to be?" They know, as Luke writes, that "indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him." Having recovered his speech, Zechariah pronounces a lengthy blessing upon his son, John. John "will be called the prophet of the Most High" and "will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins."

But with God, the impossible becomes the possible. As the old man did his duty, an angel appeared right in front of him, promising a child. And not just any child. Many people would rejoice at their son's birth. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit and would lead people back to the LORD. In the spirit of Elijah, their son would make the people ready for the coming Messiah.

As you might imagine, Zechariah found all this a bit hard to swallow. As many of us would, he wanted some sign that Gabriel's message was truly from God. But doubt can be dangerous. Zechariah was struck mute for his lack of faith and would remain so until his son's birth. When Zechariah emerged from the temple, the crowd understood that he had

¹ In Exodus 30, God commands that the priests of Israel are to burn holy incense (a general term for aromatic plants) in front of the "holy of holies" in the temple. The smoke from the incense would protect the priests from the presence of God. (See also Leviticus 16)

experienced a vision of some sort because he could do no more than make signs. Elizabeth, of course, would conceive and give birth to a male child. He would grow up to fulfill the vocation given him by God and would be called John the Baptizer.

We get a foretaste of what's coming for Elizabeth's baby when Mary, a relative, visits her. Mary has her own remarkable story to tell. She too had been visited by the angel Gabriel, who told her that she would bear the "Son of the Most High," the very Son of God. At the time, Mary was engaged to a young man named Joseph. Mary would probably have been 14 or so at the time. Her engagement to Joseph would have been completely binding, so much so that had Joseph died before their marriage, Mary would have been considered a widow.

When Mary enters the room, Elizabeth's baby, now more than six months toward full term, leaps in his mother's womb at the mere entrance of his Lord, who is in his mother's womb and not long past conception.

Why does John leap? To fully grasp the answer, we need to immerse ourselves a bit in the time and in the hope of Israel.

Imagine . . . imagine that you are a farmer or a homemaker in Galilee more than 2000 years ago. You are Jewish. You worship YHWH and you tend to your own business. You pay your taxes to the Romans and stay out of the way when their patrols come through your village. All in all, you and your family lead a pretty good life.

But . . . deep within your heart there burns a fire, a shining hope -- the hope of Israel. . . . You know and cherish the stories about God and Israel as told in the Hebrew Scriptures. Long ago, Israel had a king . . . but no more. Long ago, God himself had dwelt with his people . . . but no more. Long ago, God's promises had seemed so certain and so near . . . but no more. Though your ancestors had returned home after being exiled by the Babylonians, you know that the exile never really ended. For more than 500 years, your people have endured one oppressor after another. The sins of Israel have not been forgiven. God's promises have not been kept. Deep in your heart, you know that you and all Israel are captive still. . . .

So you hope and wait and look, perhaps not so patiently, for God's anointed one, the returning king, the Messiah who would usher in God's kingdom. On that day, the day of the Lord, the sins of Israel would be forgiven and the exile would be ended. Once again, God would be with you and all his people.

The hope of Israel

One of my favorite "Christmas carols" is actually an Advent carol. "O Come, O Come Immanuel" is all about the longings and the hopes of Israel. It is a prayer that God would keep his promises; that God would be with his people as he once had been. For then, truly, the captives would be ransomed and the "lonely exile" would be over. Yet, this is more than a prayer of possibility . . . it is a prayer of confidence. "Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel *shall* come to thee, O Israel." Of course, of course, God's promises would be kept! God is the great covenant-maker and the great covenant-keeper. Our hope is not merely some expectation that perhaps things will work out. Our hope is confidence! Our hope is certain.

And it is the very embodiment of that hope who is being carried in Mary's womb. Little wonder that baby John leaps for joy.

This is borne out in the song of Zechariah, uttered after the birth of his son. "He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David's house, just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago."

From John's vantage point, he will be the proclaimer of this Savior, the one who prepare this way of Hope. John's vantage point provides him with the purpose and vocation that will shape his life. And it will deliver him to death at the hands of the oppressor's, just as Lord will walk that same path.

Perhaps this is the question we should ask ourselves this question. When we look at the Christ-child, do we see our own purpose, our own vocation? For like John, we are to "proclaim the mighty acts of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9)

“Behold, The Lamb of God”

John and Jesus would come together again, thirty years or more after their births. This time, it wouldn't be in John's family home, but at the Jordan River.

It was about 27AD, and John had gone out to the Jordan River, preaching the coming of God's kingdom and urging his fellow Jews to come out to the river to be washed in the river's water, symbolizing their repentance of sin and their cleansing of its stain. Since the time of Joshua, more than a millennium before, the Jordan had been a potent symbol of Israel's freedom and the people's allegiance to the Lord God.

Not surprisingly, John attracted a lot of attention. So much so that the High Priest sent some representatives out to see him. The Baptizer willingly told them that he was neither the Messiah nor Elijah. Rather, he was the one spoken of in the scroll of Isaiah, the one who would prepare the way for the coming of the LORD (see Isaiah 40:1-11). John told his questioners that he was not even worthy to tie the sandals of the one who was coming. In frustration, the questioners left.

The next day, John saw Jesus of Nazareth coming to him. John stopped what he was doing, pointed at Jesus and said for all to hear:

“Look the Lamb of God,¹ who takes away the sin of the world.”

How did John know that Jesus, was the “Lamb of God”?

Apparently, John had baptized Jesus in the Jordan River some time earlier; for John went on to tell the crowd what he saw when he had baptized Jesus. John told them that this man, Jesus, was the reason John had called people out to the river. John had seen the Spirit descend on Jesus in the Jordan River and remain on him. Further, God had revealed to John that Jesus was “God's Chosen One.”

1. The phrase, “Lamb of God” is found only twice in the Bible, here and in 1:36. John probably intends it to refer to both the sacrificial lamb and the triumphant lamb depicted in Revelation 5.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin today by sharing stories from your own experience of occasions when good news came to you in bleak times. How did it make you feel? Just how good did it seem? You might imagine that you were one of the Jews ripped from everything you knew and loved, only to be dropped a thousand miles from home with no hope of returning. How might have you reacted to today's reading from Isaiah? Would it be worse if you believed this happened because of something you or your family or your extended family had done? The exiled Jews saw their exile as punishment for (1) distrusting God, (2) chasing after false idols of various sorts, and (3) abandoning social justice. Does this understanding help you to read these verses in a different light? How do they hit your heart?
2. You might share some stories of times in your life that you received particularly good news? What do these stories have in common? What made the news so good? Have you ever waited a long time for good news? How did you feel when it arrived? Did the wait make the good news seem all the more good? How can we build up our anticipation of the good news of Christmas?
3. We are used to thinking of Lent as a time of preparation. But I'm not so sure that we view Advent as a time of preparation. Should we? You might consider what Advent means to you. What would it mean to prepare for Christmas (and I don't mean getting the tree up!). What you think is the purpose of Advent? Indeed, why has the church developed church seasons, like Lent and Advent, at all?
4. Today, the first Sunday of Advent, is the first Sunday on the church calendar. It is the beginning of the new Christian year. Why would the beginning of Advent be the beginning of the year? What does this signify about our faith?

Daily Bible Readings

(These are all passages from Isaiah that look ahead to Israel's deliverance and God's reign)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Isaiah 25:6-10 The great messianic banquet that awaits God's people; Jesus told many parables about banquets and feasts.

Tuesday, Isaiah 40:1-11 An announcement of God's reign; in Matthew 3, John the Baptist is the one who "cries out in the wilderness"

Wednesday, Isaiah 52:7-15
Messengers bring the Good News of salvation and the reign of God.

Thursday, Isaiah 53 Could it be that Israel's salvation will come through suffering? This passage is a mini-summary of Jesus' vocation.

Friday, Isaiah 61:5-11 An announcement of the Good News and the coming of God's kingdom. Jesus read from this passage of Isaiah at the beginning of his public ministry (Luke 4).

Weekly Prayer Concerns

