

Christmas is what we need in our relationships

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a four-part series

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Luke 1:13–17, 26–33, 39–45 (CEB)

¹³The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the Lord’s eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. ¹⁶He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

²⁶When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David’s house. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸When the angel came to her, he said, “Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!” ²⁹She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. ³¹Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. ³³He will rule over Jacob’s house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom.”

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

Matthew 3:1–12 (CEB)

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, ²“Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” ³He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

The voice of one shouting in the wilderness,

“Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.”

⁴John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey.

The Christmas story is told through the stories of families.

For many of us, family lies at the heart of Christmas. There is often great joy and warmth when our families gather during the Christmas season. Sometime in the distant past, the local Engle clan decided to gather en mass on Christmas Eve Eve (not a typo). We meet at our house in great numbers, creating a not-so-dull roar as we consume too much food and liquid cheer. It is loud, raucous, and a lot of fun. It gets all the festivities to come off on the right foot.

But I also know that large family celebrations can have a way of exacerbating tensions and conflicts in families. I suppose that most of us have seen it and even contributed to it from time to time. Sin, you see, doesn’t disappear at Christmas. Our families, indeed all of our relationships, need Christmas every bit as much as the rest of our lives.

The Advent story takes us within some other families’ stories, with their own tensions and troubles, needing their own rescue . . . needing their own Christmas. So, let’s meet an elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who carry a deep sadness within their hearts.

The impossible becomes possible

The temple in Jerusalem was the workplace of the priests of Israel. The priestly system was 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 BC or so, 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 any possibility of a child.

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 LORD.

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 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 Baptist.

When Elizabeth was about six months pregnant, the angel Gabriel made another visit. This time he visited Elizabeth's young, poor, and unmarried cousin, Mary. Mary was engaged to marry Joseph, and she was understandably perplexed by the angel's visit. Despite Mary's virginity, Gabriel told her that God's Holy Spirit would come upon her. She would conceive and give birth to a child to be named Jesus and called the Son of God. Her son would be given the throne of David and a kingdom that would have no end. To all this Mary would simply reply, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (See Luke 1:26-38 for the announcement of Jesus' birth.)

So, sometime thereafter Mary went to visit Elizabeth in her home. One woman is old, but now pregnant long after giving up hope. The other is young and unmarried, but now pregnant and carrying the hope of Israel. Joy floods the room. At the mere sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's baby leaps in her womb. Elizabeth herself is nearly overcome with the power of it all . . . she knows that Mary is the mother of her Lord. It would be Elizabeth's son who would grow up to proclaim the arrival of this Lord, the very Lamb of God.

A moment of past, present, and future

Last week, we heard the prophets speak a word of anticipation, looking ahead to the glorious day when God would settle all accounts and put all things right, when all the nations would come streaming to God and live in peace. The Christian proclamation is that

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)

this Day of the Lord arrived in Jesus, beginning with his birth and God's profound and humbling incarnation. It is as if they were saying "God will act!" – the future tense. The arrival of God's Messiah *will* change the world.

And so we come to Elizabeth's son, now grown, bursting upon the scene and preaching a message of preparation and repentance, enacting the cleansing by washing people in the Jordan River.

John announces that the Day of the Lord is fast upon God's people and they must ready themselves for it. Centuries before another prophet had cried out: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" And now John cries out that the time has come. The moment has arrived.

It is difficult for us to grasp just how volatile and violent was the world across which John's words drifted. Danger lay just beneath the surface of daily life. Too often, it came bursting forth spilling blood even within the sacred walls of Jerusalem's Temple Mount. But John stood out there in the Jordan, the boundary between civilization and the wilderness. He dressed the part: animal skins, living off locusts and honey. Some even mistook him for Elijah, longing for God to do God's big thing.

Thus, John the baptizer, laying his eyes on Jesus pronounces that he, this modest man from Galilee, is the One, the long-awaited Lamb of God who will reconcile the world to God (John 1:29). In essence, John was saying wake up, dress in your best clothes, the big day has come.

But John's message was one not only of immediacy but of anticipation. For he pronounced that Jesus would baptize not with water, not for mere repentance, but with the Holy Spirit, for rebirth. And this Spirit of God, whom the people of God would come to understand as the third person of the Trinitarian God, would be God present with his people, as God had once been, long before.

The Spirit of Christ is, in the wonderful words of Gordon Fee, "the evidence of the presence of the future." Not only was the arrival of the Christ a fulfillment of God's promises made to Abraham, Jesus was also the present-future, the one through whom God's wondrous future came rushing to meet the present day.

Preparation

In God's kingdom, the brokenhearted are healed, captives are set free, those who mourn are comforted – all this is truly Good News to the oppressed. In God's kingdom, swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:5). The blind see, the deaf hear, and the mute speak (Isaiah 35:5-7). The prophets of the Old Testament spoke long and clearly about the coming of God's kingdom. In his teachings and actions, Jesus taught and showed people what God's kingdom is really like. He healed the sick, he made the blind see – all that is wrong with this world will be healed. Jesus hung around with the outcasts of Jewish society to demonstrate that everyone is welcome in the people of God. He showed people that God's kingdom is not just a promised future but also a present reality.

In Advent, we celebrate the coming of Jesus, the anointed of God. John and Jesus both proclaimed that a new day was dawning. Jesus showed the Jews a new way of being the people of God so that they might truly be the light to the world. We have the same responsibility to be God's light, to do all we can to build a world in which God's will is done, to bring about the marriage of heaven and earth that we pray for each week. But in seeking after this divine marriage, we are not on our own. The Holy Spirit, the empowering presence of God, is our "comforter" and "advocate" (John 14:26 & 15:26). The new day is a day of comfort and peace and joy. It is a little ironic that the stress of the holiday season can make it so hard for us to embrace the peace of God's kingdom. We ought to catch our collective breath and see the reality of God's kingdom in the look of unbridled joy on children's faces, in our efforts and gifts that help and serve others, in the personal relationships that we cherish, and in all the goodness of this life.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Though Zechariah had stepped into the temple, he was not prepared to be confronted by the presence of God. He was certainly not prepared for his prayers to be answered, for surely he and his wife would never have children. Consider this. Are we prepared for God's presence in our lives? Do we really expect that our prayers will be answered? Can we see the presence of God in our midst? Two thousand years ago God burst in on the scene in a dramatic and unexpected way? What are some things we might do this Advent to help us be more prepared for God's bursting into our own lives and to trust that he does so?

2. Can you even imagine the sheer joy that must have been running through Elizabeth and Mary? Luke's Gospel is filled with such stories of joy. What are some joyful stories of your own life? What have been the most joy-filled times in your life? I remember that when my sons were born I felt like I was electrified . . . though, in truth, I don't know that I can really describe my feelings. Perhaps it was one of those out-of-the-body experiences. I simply remember being joyful in every part of my being. Perhaps that is what it was like for Elizabeth and Mary. Discuss what these joyful experiences have in common. How might they point us toward God, especially God as Savior and Redeemer? What does the power of these experiences reveal to us about God?

Daily Bible Readings

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 35:1-10 The land of God's people bursts into glorious bloom.	Tuesday, Zephaniah 3:14-20 The time for rejoicing has come!
Wednesday, Luke 1:5-25, 57-80 The full story of John's birth	Thursday, John 1:10-34 John the Baptizer's testimony about Jesus
Friday, Mark 6:14-29 Herod's execution of John the Baptizer	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Matthew's Gospel

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Acts

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Beginning this week, December 13

The Story that is Handel's Messiah

We'll be learning the story behind Handel's great oratorio, *Messiah*, and it's telling of the biblical story.

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org