

## Scripture Reading for Sunday Dec 9<sup>th</sup> 2018

### Malachi 3:1-4 (NIV)

<sup>3</sup> “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. <sup>2</sup> But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. <sup>3</sup> He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, <sup>4</sup> and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

### Luke 1:67-79 (NIV)

<sup>67</sup> His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

<sup>68</sup> “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. <sup>69</sup> He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David <sup>70</sup> (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), <sup>71</sup> salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us— <sup>72</sup> to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, <sup>73</sup> the oath he swore to our father Abraham: <sup>74</sup> to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear <sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

<sup>76</sup> And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, <sup>77</sup> to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, <sup>78</sup> because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven <sup>79</sup> to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

## Sermon: What Are You Waiting For?

What is it that “The Greatest Showman,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “La La Land,” and “Mamma Mia” all have in common? They are all modern musical hit movies. Love them or hate them, there is something special about a musical, whether its the flamboyant and colourful costumes, the sense of nostalgia, or the music and dance routines themselves. A musical is a multisensory medium used to tell a good story. The beginning of Luke’s gospel is like a musical in that Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon – not to forget the angels - all burst into song during the drama. And, just like in a musical, the lyrics themselves are vitally important. We have just sung a modern version of the *Magnificat*, the song of Mary, and today we will explore the profound lyrics of Zechariah’s prophetic psalm of praise; but first, let’s set the scene.

Waiting in *hope*, yet with a sense of *powerlessness* to bring about the desired change, is an important element of Advent. This is especially so in the Luke’s account of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the aging parents of John the Baptist. For some reason, Luke devotes a significant amount of time in relating the story of John’s birth. We all know John the Baptist grew up to be an influential prophet; maybe his reputation even reached the ears of Theophilus, to whom Luke dedicates his work. We also know from Luke’s second volume, the Book of Acts, that disciples of John the Baptist were to be found as far away as Ephesus in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> Luke, therefore, seems to think it’s important to clarify the relationship between Jesus and John, and their respective roles and ministries, perhaps in order to address any confusion or rumours that may have been circulating. We are told that just as the birth of Jesus was special, so were the circumstances surrounding the birth of John. Even though we heard some of that story in the Sunday School pageant last Sunday, let us remind ourselves of some of the details.

Luke tells us both Jesus and John were born while King Herod the Great was ruler. He was a vassal king whose power was given to him by the Roman emperor - to whom he was obligated. But *unlike* Israel’s kings of the Old Testament, God did *not* work directly through Herod; he was sidelined. Instead, God worked through a peasant girl, Mary, and her fiancé, Joseph, and through Elizabeth and Zechariah. Now, Zechariah was a priest of the line of Abijah<sup>2</sup> and Elizabeth was a descendent of the great Aaron himself,<sup>3</sup> so this places them in the social upper-class, nevertheless, God chose to work through *ordinary, faithful* Jewish people,<sup>4</sup> *not* through military conquerors or royalty.

Luke’s accounts of heavenly messengers and miraculous births are reminiscent of the birth of Samuel to Hannah.<sup>5</sup> These were typical Jewish *signs* that the child would be important in the life of the nation, and Luke makes that explicit, saying, John “will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born”!<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 19:1–7; The mention of Apollos (from Alexandria) in Acts 18:24-28 also gives the impression he was a follower of John.

<sup>2</sup> See 1 Chr. 24:10; Neh. 12:4,17.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:5. Note too that Elizabeth was a “relative” of Mary (Luke 1:36). To say she was Mary’s *aunt* is too strong from the Greek.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:6.

<sup>5</sup> See 1 Sam 1:1-2:11. As we will see, Hannah’s song is alluded to in Zechariah’s prophecy, e.g., see “horn” in 1 Sam 2:1,10.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 1:15. Moreover, both Elizabeth and Zechariah are also described as “filled with the Holy Spirit”; Luke 1:41,67.

Like Hannah, Elizabeth was powerless, unable to conceive a child, yet she and her husband lived in hope – perhaps a ridiculous hope, given their old age. One day, a divine messenger comes to Zechariah and says, “Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him 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. . . . He will bring back *many* of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”<sup>7</sup>

That is a stunning proclamation on a number of counts! Not only will they have a child – a *son* – but the mention of John in terms of the “spirit and power of Elijah” is *incredibly* powerful! It indicates that that John will be a *prophet*. That’s important because they were living in dark days when there had been no recognised mouthpiece for God for several centuries. But as exciting as that might sound to a priest like Zechariah, the mention of “Elijah” alludes to John being a *special* prophet! Israel’s last prophet, Malachi, had prophesied, “Look, I will send you *Elijah* the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD arrives. *He will encourage fathers and their children to return to me*, so that I will *not* come and strike the earth with judgment.”<sup>8</sup> That’s what the angel was referring to. To Zechariah, Elizabeth, and other pious Jews<sup>9</sup> this meant that the day they longed for was coming very soon. They were *waiting in hope* for God’s initiative, for God to act decisively in history, for God’s light to shine in the darkness once again. And now, at last, it seems that new day is dawning. Unless we appreciate the depth and duration of the darkness, we will not value the joy of Advent. As the prophet Isaiah put it: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.”<sup>10</sup>

This news seemed just too good to be true and Zechariah, understandably, is skeptical. He asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”<sup>11</sup> The ordinariness of this very human situation is clear; perhaps of all the people in the Christmas story, we can relate to Zechariah and his doubts! It seems more is expected from a priest than of Mary,<sup>12</sup> since by God’s power Zechariah is struck dumb because of his unbelief!<sup>13</sup> If you think about this for a moment, this story of multiple miracles symbolically mirrors that of the nation of Israel, but in miniature, in that Zechariah’s enforced silence and waiting in hope reflects Israel’s impatient longing to see God’s coming.

What did John do during this time? We don’t know, of course, but he probably reread the scriptures, as well as listened to his wife! Taking the story at face value, searching the holy texts is quite plausible for a priest to do. After all, an encounter with an angel resulting in real physical consequences would make a pious Jew look to scripture for context. Our gospel reading today tells us what happens next.

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 1:13-17.

<sup>8</sup> Mal 4:5-6.

<sup>9</sup> Including Simeon and Anna; Luke: 2:25-38. Moreover, Simeon’s blessing extends to *non-Jews*!

<sup>10</sup> Isa 9:2.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 1:18.

<sup>12</sup> See Luke 1:34.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 1:20. Luke also gives the impression he cannot hear – Luke 1:62.

After Zechariah formally named his son “John,” he could suddenly speak and he blessed God.<sup>14</sup> The people’s reaction was one of *fear*; they also recognised that the specialness of John’s birth indicated that *God* was at work in this situation and they wondered what his future would be.<sup>15</sup> Like with Mary’s *Magnificat*,<sup>16</sup> Luke uses this narrative to introduce *theological* insights through Zechariah’s Spirit-inspired song of prophecy, the so-called *Benedictus*.<sup>17</sup> I suggest that this is Luke’s *prime* focus in these stories and he spends the rest of his gospel explaining how these divine messages are fulfilled.

As we will see, the prophecy comes in two distinct parts.<sup>18</sup> The first is *very Jewish*, in that it uses rich Old Testament imagery. For example, just listen to how Hannah begins her song of praise for the birth of her son, Samuel: “My heart rejoices in the LORD; my horn is exalted high because of the LORD. I loudly denounce my enemies, for I am happy that you delivered me.”<sup>19</sup> The word “horn” here signifies “strength” or “might.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, certain *Aramaic* words have meanings that resonate with people’s names and that gets lost in translation into *Greek*. To make sense of all this we need to know that John’s name means “God is gracious,” Zechariah’s name means “God has remembered again,” and “Elizabeth” means “God is my oath.” With all this in mind, listen again to the Zechariah’s prophetic song:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, because he has come to help and has redeemed his people. For he has raised up a *horn of salvation for us* in the house of his servant David,<sup>21</sup> as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from long ago, that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us.<sup>22</sup> He has done this to *show mercy* to our ancestors, and to *remember his holy covenant*—the *oath* that he swore to our ancestor Abraham.<sup>23</sup> This *oath* grants that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, may serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him for as long as we live.”<sup>24</sup>

Thanking God for his son, John, is *not* the subject of this part of the song! Zechariah knows that if John is a new Elijah-figure, then the Messiah’s coming is soon to follow. Having made that connection, Zechariah’s prophetic song is proclaiming God’s gracious provision of a mighty deliverer. This prophecy is all about God remembering his covenant to Abraham, a song of praise to God for keeping his promises and for showing mercy. In fact, in-keeping with Jewish expectation, the Messiah would rescue them from their political oppressors, from “all who hate us” – as Zechariah puts it. They understood their deliverance from their enemies was so they could worship God in peace and without fear. Consider the

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<sup>14</sup> Luke 1:64.

<sup>15</sup> Luke 1:65-66.

<sup>16</sup> See Luke 1:46-55.

<sup>17</sup> Luke 1:67-79; It is called the *Benedictus* because after its first word in the Latin translation. Some have thought this prophecy of Zechariah was originally a hymn circulating among followers of John the Baptist and/or Jewish Christians. If so, then versus 76–79 may be a Lucan/Christian addition to make it clear that the focus is on Jesus and that John “will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” Both the *Benedictus* and the *Magnificat* entered into the liturgy in the seventh century.

<sup>18</sup> Namely, 1:68-75 and 1:76-79. The break in 1:76 (“And you, child . . .”) shows a change in audience/subject.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Sam 2:1.

<sup>20</sup> See also Ezek 29:21; 1 Sam 2:10; Ps 18:2.

<sup>21</sup> See also 2 Sam 7:8–16.

<sup>22</sup> See also Ps 18:17; 106:10; 2 Sam 22:18.

<sup>23</sup> See also Gen 12:1–3; 26:3.

<sup>24</sup> Luke 1:68-75 (NET Bible).

irony of that aspiration given the ongoing Middle East tensions! And remember, then and now, there is no separation of sacred and secular for pious Jews.

You can then image Zechariah looking down at the baby in his arms as he continues with the second part of his prophetic song: “And you, child, will be called ‘the *prophet* of the Most High.’<sup>25</sup> That designation is to be differentiated from “*Son of the Most High*,” which was the title the angel told Mary concerning Jesus.<sup>26</sup> “For you will go *before the Lord to prepare his ways*.”<sup>27</sup> Those words would remind Jews of the prophet Malachi, who – as we heard in our Old Testament reading - prophesied: “I am about to send my messenger, who will clear the way before me. . . .”<sup>28</sup> John’s role is further clarified; he is “to *give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins*.”<sup>29</sup> Having “*knowledge of salvation*” implies God’s rescue will be *realised* in detail and not living merely in the *hope* of it, as Zechariah’s and his contemporaries do presently. Luke later describes John’s ministry as preaching a baptism of *repentance* for the *forgiveness of sins* in all the region around the Jordan River.<sup>30</sup> All this suggests that Zechariah’s vision goes beyond being physically “saved from their enemies” in that forgiveness of sins points to a wider and deeper meaning of the word “salvation.”

Recalling that John means “God is *gracious*,” Zechariah goes on, “Because of our God’s *tender mercy* the dawn will break upon us *from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness* and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”<sup>31</sup> John’s birth and calling come from God’s tender mercies, and John’s role is to point to the coming of Jesus the Messiah, the one who – like the dawn – will break into history to reveal God’s light to *all* in darkness. This echoes the words of Isaiah: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.”<sup>32</sup> Darkness, then, is dispelled by the revelation of God’s grace towards us – the light of Christ is coming.

Zechariah concludes by proclaiming the Messiah “will guide us into the way of peace.”<sup>33</sup> And that remind us of our Advent Candle this morning. Peace is not just the absence of violence, but peace is vital to provide the necessary space for justice, healing, and the opportunity for restoration of relationships with each other and with God. Peace – *shalom* – is therefore necessarily tied to salvation. All this, in Zechariah’s mind, is a fulfillment both of Old Testament prophecy *and* God’s promises to Abraham and David. The worshipping community to whom Luke writes – including us - is therefore

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<sup>25</sup> Luke 1:76a. “Most High” is a polite euphemism that avoids articulating God’s personal and holy name, “Yahweh.”

<sup>26</sup> Luke 1:32,35.

<sup>27</sup> Luke 1:76b.

<sup>28</sup> Mal 3:1.

<sup>29</sup> Luke 1:77. See also Jer 31:31-34. Both the oppressors and the oppressed are sinners; both need rescuing. We *all* need a saviour!

<sup>30</sup> See Luke 3:3. (See Luke 3:1-18, 7:26–28; Isa 40:3-5). The way Luke presents John the Baptist’s ministry (e.g., 3:7-9) also includes a strong sense of divine judgment, in-keeping with Mal 4:5-6. Later, when John is in jail, he wonders if Jesus is truly the Messiah since Christ’s message seemed at odds with his own (Luke 7:18-35). Jesus points John back to scripture (Luke 4:16-21). [All this detail goes to show Luke’s emphasis and clarification of the persons and roles of Jesus and John.]

<sup>31</sup> Luke 1:78-79. Note, Luke’s two-volume work goes on to (explicitly) explain “all” includes non-Jews!

<sup>32</sup> Isa 60:1-2; see also Jer 23:5.

<sup>33</sup> Luke 1:79.

invited to join voices with that of Zechariah to serve the God of miracles and new beginnings, and to live in holiness and righteousness and without fear.

Zechariah's story reflects the personal hopes and fears of ordinary people, hesitating as he does between faith and doubt. He may have begun as a skeptic but he ends up a man of faith! Zechariah probably didn't understand it all, but he didn't have to; he rejoices as God deals with the details. Trusting in God for each new moment of history is what *faith* is all about. God is writing a big history which our human stories really matter! This is what Zechariah glimpsed in his prophetic song. There is much more to Luke's musical that we imagine at first glance!

The question for us today is, "What are *we* waiting for this Advent?" Many are impatiently waiting for school holidays and Santa's gifts. Some might be waiting for the dreaded office party to be over! And, of course, we are also looking forward to family, food, and fun-filled festivities. But Advent is much *more* than waiting for these kinds of events. If that is *all* we are waiting for, life is solely about the 'here and now' and is very shallow. Pause and look around, both locally and globally. There are many for whom the world remains a dark place; life's circumstances are not filled with fun but with fear and loneliness. We may live in peace with the freedom to live life to the full and to worship without fear, yet many around the world do not. Many are waiting for a glimpse of hope this Advent season, and they pray for God to act again in dramatic ways. If peace - *shalom* - is, as I have said, necessarily tied to salvation, then it is always a good thing to pray for that at any time of year. Yet "Peace on earth and good will to all" won't just magically appear! But peace does begin with *us* - as we follow the example of the Prince of Peace, with the strengthening help of his Spirit. Peace begins in little ways, as one candle is lit by a neighbouring candle - all being instigated by the Christ candle that was lit 2000 years ago.

Advent, then, is a time to wait with anticipation for the extraordinary to appear in the ordinary! Are we, therefore, waiting in hope for *new* signs of God's presence? As we wait for such prayers to be answered, let us not be passive or hopeless, because we know the Messiah *has* come. And as we wait for the second advent, let us continue *working* in hope for *shalom* - peace with God, each other, and with creation - and to live in holiness before God. Amen.