

## First Sunday of Advent

December 2, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings :Psalm 23: 1-10; Luke 1: 5-25

“Wait in Wonder”

*Grace and peace to you from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen*

The Temple priests were divided up into 24 divisions. Each division served in the temple twice a year. It is estimated there were about 500 priests in each division. On this particular day, “by casting lots, the duty of burning incense fell to this aged priest named Zechariah . . . Luke adds this bit of information because he wants us to see God’s hand involved in the selection of Zechariah that day. Most priests would spend their lifetime serving never to be selected to burn incense in the Temple.”<sup>1</sup> None of this would have been missed by those who originally heard Luke’s gospel. It would have been clear to them that God was on the move.

“All the other priests were praying outside and Zechariah and two assistants that Zechariah chose went into the inner temple, right before the curtain of the Holy of Holies. One assistant carried the golden bowl which he filled with burning coals from the altar. Zechariah had the incense. The other assistant charged with cleaning the ashes from the worship of the day before. The first assistant cleaned the ashes from the altar of incense, worshiped then backed away slowly, joining the other priests in prayer. The hot burning coals were then poured onto the altar of incense and the second assistant worshiped then backed away slowly and left. After they left and the door was shut the great pipes blasted announcing to the people that it was the time for prayer.”

“Zechariah then, poured the incense out onto the hot coals, and the result was a large cloud of smoke that rose to the ceiling and left the temple, the large room was filled with the fragrance of the incense which stayed for hours. This represented the prayers of God’s people. The priest would then also offer up prayers. These prayers were on behalf of Israel and her salvation through the coming of the Messiah. Then, the priest would worship and slowly back away from the altar as each of his assistants had before. Zechariah never got to this part. As soon as his prayer was finished, an angel appeared.”<sup>2</sup> It was said that for 400 years God had been silent. No prophets sent to speak God’s word to Israel. That was about to change.

It's hard to tell what shocked Zachariah more, the appearance of an angel of God or the words, "Your prayer has been answered. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John." (Luke 1: 13b) You might not think a clergyman should be surprised that God showed up at worship or answered prayer. But priests are human, too. While earnestly seeking to be faithful children of God, we can become complacent. We can find ourselves going through the motions, forgetting the God we profess, praise, pray to is real and active. We can forget when we can't make out what God is doing or our specific prayers seem unanswered. Was that Zachariah? Yet, to be fair, who wouldn't find the presence of an angel surprising? What elder man married to an elder wife who never were able to have children wouldn't wonder how they could have a child now?

But those hearing Luke tell this story would be smiling. They might be cheering on Zachariah. "Come on. Remember Sara, Rebecca, Hannah. They thought they would never have children. Think, Zachariah. When God's messengers show up and say do not be afraid, God is up to something awesome." Maybe those first hearing Luke's gospel would be reminded how God seems to work the miraculous through ordinary, often-dismissed people — Jacob, a conniving cheat; David, a boy with a slingshot; a widow, down to her last bits of flour and oil. Luke's story would awaken its listeners to those other times, when all human possibilities and initiatives seem fruitless and God did something new and unexpected: delivering a people from Egyptian slavery; parting the Red Seas; providing water and raining bread and quail for those people for 40 years in the desert. Those first listeners might be laughing, wondering if Zachariah was so shocked at the news of having a son that he missed the importance of who that son would be — the announcer of the Messiah's arrival.

It's all so fantastic, Zachariah asks the angel for a sign that it is true. Boy, does he ever get a sign! Zachariah is struck mute until his son's arrival. What seems a punishment for doubt may also be a gift. Unable to speak, he will have nine months to sit in the wonder of his experience. His inability to speak will be a constant reminder of the promises of God about to come true — he and Elizabeth will be parents and their son will be the one to prepare the way for the Messiah.<sup>3</sup> The Messiah! The long expected, the longed for savior. What will he be like? What will happen when God's kingdom comes?

We know more than Zachariah and Elizabeth did as they waited. We know about the birth of John and Jesus and their public ministry. We know it didn't work out to be the instant fix many in Israel were imagining. We know there still isn't the easy, immediate, obvious, divine intervention we'd like to see either — world peace, equality and justice for all, no more hunger or homelessness, disease or hurts. It's been more than 2,000 years since John and Jesus were born and if we are still waiting for God to work at our beckon call, in ways we'd like, on time schedule we dictate, than we will have missed what our gospel and Jesus tells us, reminds and promises us. God's ways are not our ways. God's time table is not our time table. And the God of the universe and all of time is loving and gracious and on the move to bring all creation to its peaceful, rich fullness. When you believe and trust that God is loving and faithful, you can meet life with "a measure of confidence and hope."<sup>4</sup> Even when circumstances and conditions are hard or disappointing, we believe, we trust there is more going on than the eye or heart can see. We believe, we trust that we are not forgotten or forsaken, and though we do not know when, who or how, God says "Do not be afraid. My love, my light will win."

Zachariah and Elizabeth would wait in wonder and hope for nine months, renewed in their trust in God's faithfulness and unexpected ways. Isn't that the very invitation of the Advent season? It's only 23 days this year but do not underestimate what the Spirit of God can do in you, in us in those 23 days. As we listen to the stories of God working through Elizabeth and Zachariah and peasants Mary and Joseph . . . as we light our candles, reflect on God's word and pray . . . as we remember God coming to be among us in the vulnerability of a baby who would later give his life for the love of us . . . as we remember Jesus will come again and God will make all things right . . . we too, can wait in wonder and hope and renew our trust in God's faithfulness and unexpected ways. Welcome to Advent. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 12/1/18

## ENDNOTES

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1. Brian Evans, "Sermon: Your Prayer Has Been Heard" posted on October 18, 2010 at <https://gccwaverly.net>

2. Ibid

3. Author unknown, "Sermon/Class for December 9, 2012" posted at <http://www.immanuelutherankewaunee.org/>

