

## ADVENT 2009: 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday

"People Get Ready"

*Luke 3:7-18*

13 December 2009

Pastor Duke Jeffries

### LECTIONARY READINGS

*Isaiah 12:2-6*

*Philippians 4:4-7*

*Zephaniah 3:14-20*

*Luke 3:7-18*

Luke's account of the Christmas story begins NOT with Jesus, or with the virgin Mary, but with an old man named Zechariah ("*The Lord Will Remember*"). Let us turn in our Bibles to the first chapter of Luke's gospel, beginning at verse 5.

*My story begins with a Jewish priest, Zechariah, who lived when Herod was king of Judea. Zechariah was a member of the priestly order of Abijah. His wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and now they were both very old.*

*Luke 1:5-7 NLT*

It is impossible for most of us to imagine the sorrow and disgrace suffered by a childless couple in 1<sup>st</sup> century Judea. Children born to a husband and wife were evidence of God's most basic blessing to their marriage. The failure to produce a son (and heir) was deemed a genealogical tragedy, but the failure to produce any children was perceived by many to indicate God's displeasure with the union, and constituted legal grounds for divorce. Such perceptions were sharpened if the husband happened to be a priest, as was old Zacharias, who was married to Elizabeth, herself a direct descendent of Aaron. They are described by Luke as earnestly devout, so we can guess that they were also admired and respected, despite their childlessness. Still, their disappointment in this matter must have been a source of quiet heartache during their long years together, and had surely cost them many prayers.

Historians tell us that there were upwards of 18,000 priests in Judea at this time. Luke reports that Zacharias was a member of the eighth order in the twenty-four orders of the Jewish priesthood – the order of Abijah (**1 Chronicles 24:10**). Since there were so many of them, a priest served in the Temple only two non-consecutive weeks out of every year. Many would never enjoy the great privilege of officiating at the sacrifice during his lifetime. That honour was awarded by lot. As Luke's account begins, the lot had fallen to Zacharias. He had been chosen by God Himself to offer the incense that day!

"Every morning and evening, sacrifice was made for the whole nation. A burnt offering of a male lamb, one year old, without spot or blemish, was offered, together with a meat offering of flour and oil and a drink offering of wine. Before the morning sacrifice and after the evening sacrifice incense was burned on the altar of incense so that, as it were, the sacrifices might go up to God wrapped in an envelope of sweet-smelling incense.

"The incense was burned and the offering made in the inmost court of the Temple, the Court of Priests. While the sacrifice was being made, the congregation thronged in the next court, the Court of the Israelites. It was the privilege of the priest at the evening sacrifice to come to the rail between the two courts after the incense had been burned to bless the people."

- William Barclay: *The Gospel of Luke*

We continue in **Luke 1**:

*One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary and burn incense in the Lord's presence. While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying.*

- **Luke 1:8-10** NLT

On this occasion, the “great crowd” would have to wait longer than usual for the appearance of the officiating priest. Zacharias would be delayed – and would also be incapacitated – by an angelic messenger.

We continue in **Luke 1**:

*Zechariah was in the sanctuary when an angel of the Lord appeared, standing to the right of the incense altar. Zechariah was overwhelmed with fear. But the angel said, “Don't be afraid, Zechariah! For God has heard your prayer, and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son! And you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice with you at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or hard liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. He will persuade many Israelites to turn to the Lord their God. He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah, the prophet of old. He will precede the coming of the Lord, preparing the people for His arrival. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will change disobedient minds to accept godly wisdom.”*

- **Luke 1:11-17** NLT

We must pause in Luke's narrative to note an astonishing fact: this angelic prophecy was the first word from God spoken to His people in over 400 years! Zechariah, completely overwhelmed by both the angel's presence and his own life's circumstances, and despite his and Elizabeth's years of prayer for a child, could not believe what he was hearing.

*Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I know this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is well along in years.”*

- **Luke 1:18** NLT

The old man's doubt seemed to have infuriated the angel. We can only imagine what an “angry angel” sounds like!

*The angel said, “I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was He who sent me to Bring you this good news! And now, since you didn't believe what I said, you won't be able to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly come true at the proper time.”*

And indeed they did. Luke reports that Zechariah returned home after his week of service in the Temple ended and that, shortly after, his wife conceived and later bore a son, at which time the old priest's voice returned. His song of praise on the occasion, inspired directly by the Holy Spirit and recorded in **Luke 1:67-79**, concludes with his own prophetic declaration:

*“And you, my little son,  
will be called the prophet of the Most High,  
because you will prepare the way for the Lord.*

*You will tell His people how to find salvation  
through forgiveness of their sins.*

*Because of God's tender mercy,  
the light from heaven is about to break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
and to guide us to the path of peace."*  
- **Luke 1:76-79** NLT

Between the angelic annunciation to Zechariah and the birth of John, a young girl who lived in the backwater town of Nazareth was also visited by the angel Gabriel, who informed her that she, too, would bear a son, and that His name would be Jesus. He would be the Messiah, the One for whose coming John would prepare the way. And this takes us to the third chapter of **Luke**.

The setting is some twenty-five or thirty years later. John has become the most famous man in Judea, recognized as the first authentic prophet of *Jahweh* since Malachi, the one prophesied by Isaiah to be "...*a voice shouting in the wilderness, 'Prepare a pathway for the Lord's coming'*". He is now regarded as a bit of a wild man, living in his self-imposed exile deep in the Judean wilderness. According to St. Matthew, he fully dressed the part, and his preaching drew great crowds of people to the banks of the Jordan River, curious to see this "new Elijah" and anxious to hear the word of the Lord:

*John's clothes were woven from camel hair, and he wore a leather belt; his food was locusts and wild honey. People came from every section of Judea and from all over the Jordan Valley went out to the wilderness to hear him preach. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.*  
- **Matthew 3:4-6** NLT

Luke continues this narrative.

*Here is a sample of John's preaching to the crowds that came for baptism: "You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee God's coming judgment? Prove by the way you live that you really have turned from your sins and turned to God. Don't just say, 'We're safe – we're the descendants of Abraham'. That proves nothing. God can change these stones here into children of Abraham. Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever your roots. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire."*

*The crowd asked: "What shall we do?"*

*John replied, "If you have two coats, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry."*

*Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, "Teacher, what should we do?"*

*"Show your honesty," he replied. "Make sure you collect no more taxes than the Roman government requires you to."*

*"What should we do?" asked some soldiers.*

*John replied, "Don't extort money, and don't accuse people of things you know they didn't do. And be content with your pay."*

*Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. John answered their questions by saying, "I baptize with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am – so much greater that I am not even*

worthy to be His slave. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He is ready to separate the chaff from the grain with His winnowing fork. Then He will clean up the threshing area, storing the grain in His barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire.” John used many such warnings as He announced the Good News to the people.”

- **Luke 3:7-18** NLT

This kind of preaching is no longer fashionable. It is rarely heard even in the church. Why? Because even those who call themselves Christians don't like the sound of it. We find its tone harsh and unfriendly. We prefer to be addressed as “Dearly beloved” rather than “You brood of snakes!” We like to think that we have already “repented” – we did so, didn't we, when we “received Jesus as our Saviour”. Isn't that sufficient? Aren't we all OK now?

Dear friends, repentance isn't accomplished by means of a single act of faith. It involves a lifetime of transformation from the selfish creatures we are into the selfless servants we are called to become. It requires a continual, deliberate re-ordering of our life's priorities, a process the theologians call our “sanctification”. It is accomplished through a confluence of three energetic dynamics:

- the sovereign will of God (**1 Thessalonians 3:4a**),
- the transforming power of the Holy Spirit (**John 14:17, 26**), and
- the faithful exercise of my own stubborn will (**Philippians 2:13**).

John's message was the simple exhortation of Christian ethics: Repent! Change your mind – have a completely new and different mind! Turn away from the things of earth; turn – and turn, and turn again – to the things of God. **Prove by the way you live that you really have turned from your sins and turned to God** – or, as the English Standard Version has it, **Bear fruits in keeping with repentance!**

John's message is not a homily, delivered in a warm and friendly voice and consisting of vague but noble-sounding generalities. This is how many of today's most famous TV preachers preach, but not John. He shouts, he prods, he gets in the congregation's business. And he gets specific:

- Share with those less-fortunate than yourself.
- Be honest in all your dealings.
- Don't push the little guys in your life around.
- Learn to be content with what God provides.

Jesus added to that list:

- Love one another. Don't just try to like one another. Don't just put up with one another. Love one another, Jesus said, *just as I have loved you* – by servicing one another, by making yourself available, by washing each other's dirty feet, by removing yourself from the center of your universe.
- Love your neighbor every bit as much as you love yourself.
- Love your enemies! That includes all those who don't look like you do, don't live like you do, and don't think like you do – even those who don't like you so much, either! Be as eager to see mercy done as you are to see justice done.

This, beloved, is how John the Baptizer exhorted the people of God in ancient Israel to prepare the way for the Lord. And this is how God's Word exhorts us -- the people of God in Myersville in 2009 – to prepare the way for the second coming of the Lord.

Repent, dear friends. Re-open your hearts to His coming. Turn away from all that has taken you away from God during the past year. Let us turn again to God as we await his coming. Let us strive in this season of advent to *prove by the way that we live that we really have done so*.

Might I offer some suggestions?

First, confess your sins. Admit to God what He already knows about whatever you have done or are doing which is separating you from the comfort and joy of His presence, and affecting your level of fellowship in this church family. If you need to ask anyone for forgiveness, do it right away. And if you need to forgive someone, call them or go to see them and do it. Re-dedicate yourself to God in prayer. Speak your repentance to your heavenly Father.

If you never really have come to God through faith in Jesus Christ, I encourage to receive Christ as your Saviour and Lord. Today. Now, right here in this place. We will pray for you and with you, and will strive to encourage you in your new life in Christ. It will be, I promise, the greatest Christmas gift you will ever receive.

- If you have children at home, plan a specific family time during this Advent season to talk to your kids about what Advent and Christmas really mean, and what changes you intend to make – beginning with this year – in your family Christmas celebration. Let them know that you are going to use Advent as a time of proper preparation for the coming of the Lord Jesus. Many excellent family-friendly resources are available for this type of activity. An in-home Advent Wreath around which you gather each night might be a good idea. The reading of a short Advent meditation from one of several good, kid-friendly Advent or Christmas devotionals as you gather around the Advent Wreath might become a cherished tradition for your family. And *involve your children* in any of the following “fruits in keeping with repentance” acts of service which could be undertaken as a family Advent activity. You'll be sowing seeds of wisdom and perspective on the true meaning of Christmas for generations to come, and you'll be pleasantly surprised how excited your children will get about it.

- Make it a point during this season of Advent to call someone with whom you have lost contact in recent years. This seems rather easy, and I'll bet this simple gesture will bless that person's heart. If no one comes to mind, why not start by calling Linda Kulina? Or Dwight and Debbie House? Or Otto and Lil Berg? Or Jim and Linda Geary? They're moving to Winchester, Virginia next week – did you know that? Could you help with the move in any way? Do they need any food? Or help with packing? You won't know until you call.
- And be sure to prepare a meal for Betty Gibson, and drop it by her house. If possible, arrange to eat your meal with her. She will be delighted with such a visit.
- Those who know and remember her should write a nice letter to Thalia Lindsey.
- And who more than Mary Pat Kulina would be blessed by an encouraging letter or better yet, a phone call, or still better yet, an appointment for lunch? This, I think, would make for an excellent Christmas gesture by two or three of you ladies.
- Set aside a "tithe" from your Christmas gift budget and use the money to provide a gift or a donation to one of the many charitable operations which organize such campaigns in this area. Or ask Julia, or Christine, or Sandra how this "set-aside" gift of money could be used to help one or more of the HIV children they have visited in Kenya and Uganda.
- Call the Frederick or Hagerstown Rescue Mission, or the Crisis Pregnancy Center, or Hope Alive, and find out how you might be made useful during the holiday season. Or see Marlena Putman or Carol Kemp in regards to how you might be made useful in their prison ministry this month, or next month, or anytime.
- Find out who in our church family might be in for a lonely or an otherwise "difficult" Christmas this year. Have them over for dinner one night. Maybe an anonymous gift, provided by you and delivered by the Postal Service, will make this less-than-perfect Christmas one they'll always remember fondly.

It's an incomplete list, and not a terribly ambitious one. You may already be thinking about something else you could do in the next two weeks, or someone else you want to call or visit. It is only my wish that this might spark you to begin to think differently about the purpose of Advent each year, about how you and your family should "prepare the way" for the coming of the Lord now, and for Christmases yet to come.

This, beloved, is how to "get ready" for Christmas. *Soli Deo gloria*. Amen.