

Advent - God keeps his promises

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[0:00] Advent, if you don't know, in Latin, I only found out this week what it means. It means coming. And we're waiting, aren't we, to celebrate the first coming of Jesus.

And the idea of waiting for the Lord's coming is not a new one.

This was a situation for God's people throughout the Old Testament, waiting for one who would come. O come, O come, Emmanuel.

We sang that. That's what they were waiting for. Waiting for that serpent crusher, waiting for that promised seed, that promised descendant of Abraham.

Waiting for the promised descendant of David who would reign on David's throne forever. And when the Old Testament finishes with the prophet Malachi, so begins a 400-odd year wait for the Lord.

[1:19] Here's some words from Malachi. Right, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly you, 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. And some more words. This is how our Old Testament scriptures that we have before us, this is how they end. See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers. Or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction. But now silence from God. Silence. Nothing heard from God's people. And God's people are in the time of Roman rule. A wicked king, Herod is ruling, but he's only really a puppet king for the Romans to use.

[2:30] There's no word from the Lord being heard. No Messiah appeared to be on the scene. Even though they were praying, O come, O come, Emmanuel, maybe.

Nothing seemed to be happening. A dark and bleak time for the Lord's people. And for Zechariah and Elizabeth, who we meet in Luke, it's been a hard time for them personally as well.

We see they are righteous in the sight of God. They follow the Lord's commands as well as they can. But they are childless.

And they had been longing and maybe praying. I'm sure praying for a child to come. But they weren't given that.

And they were both very old, it says now. Their hopes for a child are gone. They're probably thinking through their retirement plans rather than plans for a baby.

[3:38] And to be barren as Elizabeth was in those times was seen as a disgraceful thing. This was a hard thing for them.

A dark and bleak time for them and for God's people. And here in this passage that we've read, we have a particular attention on Zechariah.

He's a priest. He and his wife are part of the descendants of Aaron the priest. And we see here in verse 8 that he carries out his usual priestly duties.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty, he was serving as a priest before God. The way it worked were there were 24 divisions of priests.

And they served two weeks of the year. And all of them would serve during festival periods. And on this day, one of the weeks when Zechariah and his division was on duty, Zechariah has the privilege of being chosen by lot to enter the temple and burn incense.

[4:59] To enter the temple, the place symbolic of God's dwelling among his people. And the burning of incense, it took place right next to the Holy of Holies.

It was a high honor for a priest to carry out this duty. And I've not realized what a big moment for Zechariah this was. This is probably a once-in-a-lifetime event for a priest. With at least 800 priests serving only on temple duty for two weeks a year, it was a rare honor. Perhaps once in a lifetime, if you get to do it at all. And so he's chosen by lot on this day. Maybe we might say that's a coincidence.

Or divinely planned by the sovereign Lord. The Lord's involved in this. And we see that down in verse 11. Then the angel of the Lord appeared to him standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

[6:10] And for Zechariah, that moment was a huge shock. An angel of the Lord appeared to him.

For us, at Christmastime, angels are quite normal, aren't they? Here's some angels on a tree. You might see them at the top of a tree. You might see them in a school nativity play.

You might see them on Christmas cards like this one. We sing about angels, don't we? Hark the herald angels sing. Angels from the realms of glory, to name just two carols that we sing.

Angels are quite normal for us at Christmastime. But for Zechariah, he doesn't have that. He doesn't have angels on Christmas trees. He doesn't have school nativity plays.

He doesn't have Christmas carols to sing about angels. Or Christmas cards sent through his door like this one. And they haven't heard from the Lord in ways like this for 400 years.

[7:18] So for Zechariah, this is a huge shock. What's an angel doing there? And we see how he feels about this.

Verse 12, When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. He was startled. He was fearful. Now, I'm one of the jumpiest people I've ever met.

If Becky just walks in a room at home, I will jump. We live near London Road train station. And at night time, if I hear a train rumbling past, I jump out of my skin even now.

Imagine doing your duties at work as Zechariah was. And suddenly, an angel from heaven appears in front of you. You're going to feel quite troubled and afraid.

And as Gabriel says later on in the passage, he's standing in the presence of God. This is a heavenly creature before Zechariah, a human being.

[8:22] He's not, Gabriel's not God. But he's an angel from heaven. Of course, he's going to feel troubled and afraid at this awesome sight.

Maybe I wonder if he was thinking, I've done something wrong. He's one opportunity to serve the Lord in this special way. And I've muttered up and angels had to turn up. We don't really know exactly what was going through his mind.

But we do know he's troubled and he's afraid. But don't be afraid, Zechariah, because this is news of great joy. News of great joy.

Zechariah, listen to this. Verse 13. The angel said to him, do you not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard.

What prayer? Zechariah's been alive a long time. He's a righteous person. He's probably prayed many prayers. What prayer?

[9:28] Well, we do know from verse 13, one prayer that's answered. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son, and you are to call his name John.

A prayer has been answered. The prayer for a child. But they've probably not prayed that prayer for many years. They're old now.

They're past the age of childbearing. I might be wrong, but I wonder if they haven't prayed that prayer for many years. But it is likely that a prayer he's prayed on this very day is praying along with the rest of the nation for the redemption of Israel, for the Messiah to come.

Oh, come, come, Emmanuel, maybe they prayed. But no answer seemed to have come.

But now, of all things, an angel comes to this one man in the temple to deliver news of great joy that prayers are being answered.

[10:37] A child's going to be born to you, Zechariah, and his name is going to be John. And you are going to have great joy at the birth of your son, and so will many other people.

Verse 14, he will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth. Now, I know there's some football fans in here.

I wonder if some younger football fans have heard of David Beckham. Have you heard of David? You have heard of David. That's good. I wondered if he'd been forgotten. There's been a Netflix documentary about him recently, and I've been watching it with great fascination. And in it, we see his dad's desire for David to be playing for Manchester United. His dad spent hours and hours practicing with David, playing football in the garden, sending his son off to football training, trying to get Manchester United interested, taking clips of his son, filming clips, thinking he's a special footballer.

[11:49] Maybe not the first parent to think that. And Beckham's dad rejoiced. At the news that his son was going to sign for Manchester United.

And as the years went by, so did many other people. As people saw David Beckham on the pitch, playing some amazing football.

His parents rejoiced. So did other people. And that's going to be the case for Zechariah with his boy, John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth. Because in this child, in this special child, we're talking about God's word being fulfilled. His word spoken through the prophet Malachi to send someone, that someone was going to be sent to prepare the way for the Lord's coming.

The waiting is over. The silence is broken. The Lord is speaking and the Lord is coming.

[13:04] But first is this one, this child, who was going to be born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. And his name is John.

And John, apparently his name means God is gracious. And God is certainly being gracious to his people here.

After those years of silence, now speaking again to his people. And being gracious to this couple who have longed for children. Maybe they've dreamed of being parents.

Prayed for them. God has heard their prayers and is answering. This is news of joy. And so be encouraged this Advent that God still does hear the prayers of his people.

He hears our cries. And he does answer. Perhaps not in ways we would ever expect. Ways we would want.

[14:08] At times we would want him to answer. But he does hear and he does answer. Verse 15 to 17 we see what this boy will be like.

Verse 15. He will be great in the sight of the Lord. He's never to take wine or other fermented drink. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.

God's going to use him. God's going to fill him with great power. God's going to fill him with great power. And he will bring many 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. Just as Malachi had prophesied. He's a man who's going to be equipped by God to prepare a people for the Lord.

[15:16] As J.C. Ryle puts it. He will turn them from ignorance to knowledge. From carelessness to thoughtfulness. From sin to God.

And we of course know what John the Baptist went on and did. He went out and preached in the wilderness. Repent. Turn around. For the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

That's who this child is. Prophecy is being fulfilled. And God was using this old couple. Who probably thought they were old and past it. Looking forward to their retirement.

But now a child's going to be born to them. And not just any child. But a special one who was coming to prepare people for the Messiah. The other one that they had been praying for.

The wait is over. And so don't doubt today that the Lord is coming. He's not slow in keeping his promises.

[16:22] Advent should remind us that the Lord came to earth once. As a fulfillment of his promises. And is going to come again. This meal that we're going to take this evening reminds us.

That the Lord Jesus is going to come back. It points us back to what he's done. And points us forward to his return. God is at work.

And it's news to be joyful about. And he's showing his utter power. In the brokenness and barrenness of Zechariah's wife Elizabeth.

Elizabeth. And God is breaking into the silence. And breaking into the barrenness of years of his people.

Without hearing the word of the Lord. Now he's speaking. And this evening again. As we're taking communion together. As we look at the table.

[17:22] At the bread and wine. When we see before our eyes. News of great joy. This evening we get to set our eyes. Upon the grace of God.

Know that God is gracious. Just as we see in John. God is gracious. God in his grace has shown us.

Even more. Than just John the Baptist. He's shown us himself. John came to point us to himself. To the one who's died on the cross.

And that's what we see this evening. Where we see a man looking broken. A man looking barren. Empty. The life running away from him.

But also we see news of great joy. That we can celebrate the cross. Achieving God's plan of redemption. For his people. For the world.

[18:21] Secondly. And more briefly. News that makes you speechless. I was thinking. About one big surprise.

I received at Christmas. One of many. It's probably. Sort of eight, nine. Maybe ten years old. And we were sitting in the lounge. And everyone was getting their presents. But not me and my brother. No sign of anything for us. Where's it going to be? Yeah. We got presents from a few other people. Not from mum and dad. They have to buy you presents. Don't they?

Until mum said. We need to go outside. And we walk down the garden path. And dad opens the shed door. And there are two new shiny bikes.

We got our presents. And while we were speechless. We had no idea. And Christmas. It can make you speechless.

[19:21] Can't it? Maybe in good ways. Maybe in bad ways. And for Zechariah. It literally does make him speechless. So verse 18.

Have a look. Zechariah asked the angel. How can I be sure of this? I'm an old man. And my wife is well on in years. How can I know this?

Understandably. Maybe he's amazed by this. But surely it's too good to be true. I'm old. And my wife is. Well he's quite polite isn't he. About his wife. She's well on in years.

He doesn't say his wife's old as well. They're old. They are past it. In terms of having children. How can this be true? And yet he's described as a righteous and devout man.

And he would have known of the births of Isaac. And Samson and Samuel to barren women. But he cannot believe it could be true for him and his wife.

[20:24] How can I know if this is really true? He's old and his wife is old. If they turned up to the Royal Sussex County Hospital. And said we're having a baby. They might be told they need to visit a psychiatric unit.

Maybe. Or told to just go away politely. But this is an angel from God in front of him. This is Gabriel standing in the presence of God.

He says in verse 19. But Zechariah does not believe. And so God was going to make him speechless. He's not had the faith to see the Lord at work here.

And as we'll see next Sunday morning. In Mary. Zechariah and Mary kind of contrasted. Zechariah doesn't believe here. And is made speechless.

And yet Mary takes God at his words. And believes. And this sin of disbelief is taken seriously.

[21:30] By the Lord closing his mouth. But also I think a sign of God's grace to him. Perhaps Zechariah would not have believed. Without this.

A sign that God is at work. He can even shut his mouth from speaking. And so surely. Surely a child is going to be born to Zechariah.

Now he's in the temple. People have been outside. Waiting for him. Wondering. What's going on. Verse 22.

He eventually comes out. And what happens. He came out. And he could not speak to them. His mouth has been shut. They realized. He had seen a vision in the temple. For he kept making signs. But remained unable to speak. Probably now. His mouth is shut. He really knows. That it's going to happen. And now. He might be desperate to say.

[22:32] I'm going to be a dad. The Lord answers prayer. The Lord is gracious. The child. The child I will have. The Lord is going to prepare the way for the Lord's coming.

The waiting is over. But he can't say any of that. Because his mouth has been shut. But Elizabeth. Back at home.

Elizabeth. In verse 24. It happens. She became pregnant. And for five months. And for five months. Remained. In seclusion.

No word from God. Can fail. And maybe. Zechariah's disbelief. Is a challenge for us. To think. Where.

Where am I finding it hard. To believe. In God's words. To take him at his words. Something to. For us to think about. But for Elizabeth.

[23:32] We see. She became pregnant. Her barrenness is over. And this year. We saw another barren woman. In the Bible. Didn't we? In 1 Samuel 2.

Hannah. And she saw the Lord's hand of blessing. On her situation. And Elizabeth does. For her. As well. Verse 25. The Lord has done this for me.

In these days. He's shown me favor. And taken away. My disgrace. Among the people. To be barren. Was considered. A disgraceful.

Disgraceful thing. But the Lord. In his mercy. Has kindly. Blessed them. With children. Taken. Away. This disgrace. And what happens?

Zechariah. Remains speechless. Let's skip down. Towards the end of the chapter. To verse 59. On the eighth day.

[24:30] They came to circumcise the child. And they were going to name him. After his father. Zechariah. But his mother spoke up. And said. No. He is to be called.

John. John. Really? That's not right. You have no relatives. Called John. John. But no.

Seriously. It's to be John. And so. Zechariah. In obedience. To God's word. In verse 63. Asks for a writing tablet. And to everyone's astonishment.

He wrote. His name. Is John. Zechariah. Confirms. What his wife had said. This child. Is to be called. John. The Lord.

Is gracious. And so. Zechariah. Is able. To then. Speak again. And what does he do. As he opens his mouth. He praises. God. And surely.

[25:28] This child. With a name. Unexpected. Whose dad. Had been forced. Into silence. Is now. Blessing God. With his voice. Surely. This is a special child.

And indeed. He is. The Lord's hand. Is upon him. He's going to be filled. With the Holy Spirit. Sent for that special purpose. Of preparing the way. For the Lord. And final thing.

For us to see. Zechariah. Opened his mouth. And praised God. And we have this wonderful song. As the Luke chapter one. Closes.

And just a few words. From this. Verse 76. 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. To give his people. Knowledge of salvation. Through the forgiveness. Of their sins. Because of the tender. Mercy of our God.

[26:24] By which the rising sun. Will come to us. From heaven. To shine on those. Living in darkness. And in the shadow of death. To guide our feet. Into the path of peace.

Wonderful words. His son's going to prepare. The way. For the most high. Going to point to the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus. Who we're going to remember. His death.

This evening. Through whom we have forgiveness. Of sins. The Lord. Jesus. Who was. The light. Dawning. On those. Dwelling. In darkness. Salvation's. Dawn. Has. Come. The Lord. Is gracious. Breaking.

Into the silence. And preparing people. For his. Coming. And the cross.

[27:22] That we get to look at this evening. We get to see. That the waiting for. The redemption of Israel. For the world. Is. Over. The final sacrifice.

For sin. Has been made. Salvation. Salvation's. Dawn. Has come. And we can. By God's grace.
Find forgiveness. For all our sins.
It's news of joy. And it's news that should make us. Speechless. we're gonna sing