

Advent: Silence & Song - Sunday 26th November 2023

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] It's the 26th of November today, so we're less than a month until Christmas Day itself, which means we're entering the season of Advent. Now, Advent is a word which means arrival, arrival, because it's a time when we remember and celebrate the arrival of Jesus here on earth some 2,000 years ago.

As we know, that arrival, that due date, if you like, is traditionally celebrated on the 25th of December, which I guess means that this Advent season which we're going to be entering into is the kind of pregnant pause, if you like, before the big day itself.

And indeed, this word pregnant is probably a fitting one because a lot of the Christmas story, particularly the story that we read about in Luke's Gospel in the Bible, revolves around not one, but two pregnancies that occur.

And so what I'd like us to do this morning is to consider these two pregnancies that happen and see what we might learn about God and about each other through them.

So we're going to have a kind of spiritual antenatal class this morning, if that's all right. To get us going, though, here's a passage from chapter 1 of Luke's Gospel in which we're told about an old guy called Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth.

[1 : 24] And let's take a look at their story. In the time of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah.

His wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Once, when Zechariah's division was on duty, and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard.

[2 : 53] 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 is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

Zechariah asked the angel, How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years. The angel said to him, I am Gabriel.

I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.

[4 : 11] When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them, but remained unable to speak.

Alright, so we've got this married couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. And as Luke tells us, we're told they were both very old.

The classic King James translation of the Bible in sort of more traditional language, it describes them as well stricken in years, which is another way to put it. Now I'll let you define what very old might mean this morning, or whether you feel well stricken or not in years.

I'm not daft enough to put a number on this this morning. I'm not going there today. But it's fair to say, they probably had their free TV license as a couple, you know, forgetting where their glasses were, that kind of stuff.

They were that kind of vintage, shall we say. But more importantly than their age though, Luke tells us that both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all of the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.

[5 : 23] And that's an important little detail, I think, because sadly, in their time and culture, being unable to have children, as was the case with Zechariah and Elizabeth, was often seen by society really as some kind of punishment or even a curse from God.

But here, Luke immediately just dispels that cruel notion by saying, nah, look, these are good godly people we're talking about. Their ability or inability, whichever it is to conceive, has nothing to do with their faith or lack of it, their lifestyle or whatever.

It's just that for whatever reason, they've never been able to have children that we're told elsewhere that as a couple, they'd longed for. Indeed, Luke, who we know was a doctor, he would have been all too familiar with the sadness, perhaps the grief that infertility and miscarriage can bring.

And so here, in his gospel, he seems keen to nip any kind of dodgy theology in the bud that blames people for being unable to have children.

No, Zechariah and Elizabeth are righteous, right, living people. As I guess you'd hope of someone like Zechariah in particular, who we're told still served occasionally as a priest in the temple in Jerusalem.

[6 : 54] And indeed, as we saw, it was on one of Zechariah's priestly shifts that the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared to him in the temple telling Zechariah and his equally vintage wife, Elizabeth, that they're going to have a miracle baby.

Even given the name, so they didn't have to work that one out between them. You're going to call this baby John, said Gabriel. John, grow up to do great things as the guy we know as John the Baptist.

What a story, what a testimony Zechariah will have. You know, being told by an angel in the temple of God, in the holiest of place, that you're going to have a son.

And yet, how does Zechariah respond to what Gabriel says? He says, how can I be sure of this? How can I be sure of this? Which we might think is a fair question, particularly a guy of his years. But let's not forget what's going on here because Zechariah is in the temple of God, the holiest of places in the whole wide world. He's standing in front of an angel who's just given him a direct, miraculous message from God.

[8 : 03] So you could ask yourself, how much more proof, how much more evidence or certainty does Zechariah need to know this is really happening here, this is actually happening?

In fact, you can almost detect a bit of frustration in Gabriel's voice when we read how he responds to Zechariah's question here. He says, I am Gabriel.

I stand in the presence of God and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now, you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens because you did not believe my words which will come true at their appointed time.

And so the miracle of John's birth will still happen but because Zechariah, it seems, didn't have enough faith to take God through the angel Gabriel at his word, he's told he's going to be unable to speak until his son is born.

Now, Elizabeth might have thought pros and cons with that, I'm sure, but Zechariah's response to this miracle, therefore, is one of silence. It's one of silence.

[9 : 17] Now, holding that thought, what's interesting is that in the very next passage from Luke's Gospel, we read about an altogether different kind of response to another angelic visitation.

And let's see how this one pans out. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee.

to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

The angel went to her and said, greetings, you who are highly favored. the Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus.

[10 : 38] Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the most high. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever.

His kingdom will never end. How will this be? Mary asked the angel since I am a virgin. The angel answered, the Holy Spirit will come on you and the power of the most high will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the son of God. Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age and she who is said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month for no word from God will ever fail.

I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled. Then the angel left her. All right, so in this story, set just six months after the first, the angel Gabriel appears again. Now other angels are available, I'm sure, but Gabriel seems to be God's go-to choice. Perhaps he had frequent flyer miles or something going on, I don't know. But anyway, Gabriel again delivers some pregnancy news again to another righteous person, this time to Mary, telling her that she's going to have a son.

[12 : 23] Who shall name Jesus. But he won't just be any old baby, no, as we know, he'll be the son of God himself. Now, with that news, how does Mary respond to it?

Does she, for example, do as Zechariah did and question whether the angel is telling the truth? Does she say, how can I be sure of this? No, it seems instead she takes Gabriel at his word and believes it will happen.

Instead, so therefore, her first question is of someone not who lacks faith, but who simply lacks understanding. Not, how can I be sure, but she says this, how will this be?

She believes it's going to happen in principle, but she wants to know understandably how it's going to happen in practice. And it's a legit question for this young woman because as a virgin girl engaged to be married, she can't conceive, you know, no pun intended, of how the angel's message will come true.

So Gabriel explains that she'll fall pregnant through the power of God's Holy Spirit, a miracle, for sure, yeah, and quite the mystery for us as well.

[13 : 41] But it's news which Mary, amazingly, seems to take in her stride. You know, she's probably 14 or 15, something like that, but there's such maturity here.

She says, I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled. So, two visits by the angel Gabriel, two miraculous pregnancies, two sons who will be born, and yet two different responses from those who receive the news.

In the first story, Zachariah, wants more proof to satisfy his doubts. How can I be sure of this? In the second story, Mary believes it will happen and simply wants more understanding.

How will this be, she says. And I guess for us here this morning, we'll probably find ourselves being able to identify with either or both of Zachariah and Mary in different ways, I think.

For example, perhaps as you hear these stories, perhaps you would say you're more of a Zachariah type of person, you know, someone who has a faith, who has a belief in God.

[14 : 55] But very often, perhaps you're just not quite sure how strong your faith is. Perhaps you wish sometimes that you had more evidence, you know, more proof, more certainty that God's real and that God's, God loves you.

Perhaps you want the angel Gabriel to appear to you to make it certain that God's there, God's real, God's got you. Perhaps at Christmas time as we'll be thinking about over the coming weeks, perhaps you like the Christmas story but you find yourself asking questions about your faith in all the details of it.

How can I be sure of all this? Then again, on the flip side, perhaps you identify a bit more with Mary. You're a Mary type of person, someone again who has faith, even a deep faith and trust in God and yet having faith doesn't mean you've switched your brain off, you know, because you want to know how God works in the world.

You want to work it out with him. Yes, you believe God is loving and cares for you and the world but perhaps you question how this can be when you experience or perhaps we see so much suffering going on.

Perhaps you want to make sense of things more both in your own life and in the wider world. Well, the good news is I think why Luke puts these two stories together, these contrasting responses, how can I be sure or how will this be?

[16:24] They're both very much of the same story. They're both very much part of the Christmas story and I think Luke wants to encourage us to allow them wherever we're at to be part of our story.

as well. You see, God can completely handle all the doubts and all the confusion we might have. He knows exactly what troubles us, what perplexes us, what winds us up maybe and our doubts and our confusion are part of our story just as they were for Zachariah and Mary. Having doubts or confusion doesn't mean God thinks any less of us. Zachariah was still described as being upright in the sight of God. Mary's described as being highly favoured. Whether you think actually I've got a fair few doubts like Zachariah or if you're just more confused like Mary, whether we're old like Zachariah or young like Mary, whether we're male or female, married or unmarried, a priest or a peasant or whatever, God's promise to each of us is that he will meet us as we are, where we are and lead us on.

And yet it's also true I think that God will probably do that with each of us in a different way. So for Zachariah for example, God zipped his lips almost I think as a way of telling him to talk less and listen more maybe, to be silent, maybe to pray, to go deeper in his awareness of just who God is and what miracles he's capable of doing.

[18:12] And maybe as hard as we might find out, maybe that's God's desire for me or for you this Advent season that we give more of our silence so that we can hear God speak to us more clearly you know to perhaps gain or regain a sense of wonder at who God is and what God can do in our lives.

Maybe silence is what God's asking of us this season. For Mary though again if we read on in Luke's Gospel her lips aren't sealed you know far from it because she bursts into poetry perhaps even a song praising God for all that he's done she famously says my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior she lets it out.

Maybe that's God's desire for you this Advent season that we'd be more vocal in how we relate to God more assertive perhaps in how we express our faith that we'd ask the questions and discover more about who God is.

Equally maybe for some of us maybe God wants to give us new confidence in our voice that we have a voice that we have something worth saying especially if you feel perhaps over the years that your voice has been stifled in your life whether by circumstances or by others maybe God wants to give us a voice a new song this season.

then again maybe there's a completely different way God will lead us on with him in this coming month this coming year one which is neither silence or song but instead might be service or study or solitude or socialising I don't know whatever else you want to pick maybe think about that and pray that one through could be any number of ways that God wants to lead us forward.

[20:05] God knows how we tick God knows how we're wired and so there has to be a way of doing this faith stuff which will fit with who we are with who you are in your unique beautiful individual way and whether you're a regular here at St John's or whether this is just an occasional thing for you as a church part of our calling is to journey together in that exploration we're still finding our way as a congregation I'm certainly still finding my way in my own faith but if we can do that journey together so much the better because hopefully I can offer something to you but you can certainly offer something to me as well and we can do that hand in hand and I think this idea of helping each other it's no accident that the Christmas story starts with these pregnancies first of John who would grow up to be the one who pointed the way to Jesus and then some six months after John was born obviously

Jesus arrives the one who would grow up to be the saviour of the world God it seems in the Christmas story and as I think Ruth will unpack a bit more for us next week God is in the habit of growing great things from even the smallest of beginnings and maybe today maybe this Advent might just be a small beginning of something new for each of us on our journey with God so as we think about that as we begin to move in to sing again in worship to share in communion you might just want to hold this picture of the hands in your mind's eye for the rest of the service because perhaps that's our desire our hands open response to God that we want to receive from him my prayer I think for us is that God would continue to meet us in all of our doubts in all of our confusion

wherever we are so that we encounter and discover more of him and more of his love in our lives and whether that response is in silence whether that's in song whether it's somewhere in the middle may we each be open to receiving his blessings of hope and peace and joy and love this Advent season and beyond
Amen Amen