

Advent 4 - Prepare the way for Him!

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[0 : 00] Morning, everyone. My name's Mike. That's immaterial, but I thought I'd tell you anyway. I always love to give a title, a theme, to whatever I share.

And today the title is taken from O Holy Night, A Thrill of Hope. Can we have the next slide up, please? Thanks, Josh.

Earlier in this chapter, we've heard a great deal about how the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and Joseph and how he spoke to them individually, told them what was going to happen, even though at times they were quite taken aback by this incredible message that they would be the earthly parents to Jesus, Saviour of the world, Messiah, Emmanuel.

But this passage, further on in the same chapter, covers the story of Zachariah and his wife, Elizabeth, who was a cousin of Mary. And there's a number of similarities and overlaps, which hopefully you'll see between both of their experiences.

Obviously, Gabriel played one massive part in this. And Gabriel is one of two angels whose names are mentioned in Scripture. The other is Michael. It just so happens that's my name.

[1 : 14] But Gabriel brings a specific... Don't you say that, Andy. Andy Sawyer. Gabriel brings a specific message to Zachariah.

You see, he is God's messenger declaring what is to come. And if only Zachariah had realized that from the start, he would have realized there's no question about what Gabriel said because he has the authority of Almighty God from the throne room of heaven to speak these words.

I would imagine if Gabriel sort of appeared to us in an isolated location, somewhere where nobody else was around, we would be taken aback, wouldn't we?

And we'd be forgiven for feeling a little bit scared of what was to come and the fact it was Gabriel at all. But sadly, Elizabeth, Zachariah's wife, was unable to conceive.

They were two very desperate people who obviously prayed and prayed and prayed that they could have a child. But up until now, nothing had changed. Sometimes in our human frailty, our inclination is to keep praying in the face of no apparent reasons.

[2 : 32] But it can leave us, no, sorry, no apparent results, but it can leave us feeling discouraged and disappointed and maybe just inclined to stop after a while.

But it's in one sense understandable that Zachariah felt the way he did about this because they prayed over and over. But what they hadn't thought of was that it's God who says ultimately no. or God who ultimately will bring about his power and his glory at his given time. As it says on the slides, there was no apparent results and it had left them with no expectation.

In their case, of a child. So then the angel Gabriel appeared to Zachariah. And just like the shepherds in the fields, he was gripped with fear.

I love the understatement sometimes of the New Testament. He was gripped with fear. Just as well we have a defibrillator installed at the front door of the church just in case Gabriel came amongst us today.

[3 : 39] But can you imagine the Whitby Gazette headlines? Angel appears at Whitby Christian Fellowship. And the defibrillator, I can't even say that word, was used on numerous occasions.

But anyway. Wonderfully, even though Zachariah was terrified just as Mary and Joseph had been and many others in scripture, Gabriel's first words were, do not be afraid.

Another understatement of the New Testament. But it's wonderful that it's there. Do not be afraid. Because when God's involved, yes he is almighty God, and when he moves, it isn't a time for us to be afraid in that sense, but to stand back in awe and wonder.

Or as that song just said there, to fall on our knees. That's the best place for us to be when God's doing what God will do. Gabriel said, do not be afraid, Zachariah.

Your prayer, not a one-off prayer, but your prayer for a long period of time about this child has been heard. And I want you to all listen to the same.

[4 : 46] Whatever you're praying for, make sure you heard this. Just like Zachariah, your prayer has been heard. Although the answer didn't come in the hour you expected or in the manner you hoped for, your prayer has been heard, and heaven does not disregard our prayers.

2 Timothy 2 says it so wonderfully, that if we are faithless, and aren't we, or aren't I so often, he remains faithful, true to his word and his righteous character, and he cannot deny himself. So keep praying to the God of faithfulness. And prayer is not about us getting God to conform to our will. That would make life much too easy.

But then we'd have a world where we're all conforming to our own will, but expecting God to do it, if you see what I mean. That's never going to work. We have to conform to God's will by faith.

It's about us bringing our request to God and leaving the outcome to him. And that's faith, and that's why God enables us with the gift of faith to pray by faith. Because we have faith in a God who is faithful.

[5 : 58] Lamentations 3, so appropriate for this passage about the light coming. It says, The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

His mercies never come to an end. Two wonderful nevers there, isn't it? They are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness.

So every day you wake up, thank God, for the renewed faithfulness and blessing and mercy of God. And Gabriel said to Zachariah, your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you are to call him John. But in his confusion, Zachariah missed the very thing he'd been praying for, but he missed it because he was in an earthly position and perspective.

Because the Bible says that Gabriel went on to say, This baby 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.

[7 : 04] He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Next slide please. But instead, Zachariah received the news in his own compartmentalized mind rather than a heavenly perspective.

I hope you understand what I meant by that. And it occurred to me that he had a bit of a standoff with the angel and he previously feared. It's really quite strange that one minute he's terrified of Gabriel, next minute he stands up and he says, Whoa, slow down.

I'm an old man, so is my wife, we can't have children. In effect, what he's saying, I think I know better. And how often have we done that where God's concerned?

I know better than God, I know the way this can work. But wonderfully, Gabriel stands up and says, He's already stood and he's massive probably. I am Gabriel.

You're an old man. I am Gabriel and I stand in the presence of God. In other words, I win. Listen to what I have to say.

[8 : 16] He says, I've been sent to speak to you and tell you this good news. What did the angels say to the shepherds? This is good news. But this reminds me of, I'm sure many of you have heard it, the story of a captain on a large naval ship who looked ahead into the dark night and saw a light in the distance.

So he immediately told his signalman to send a message. Alter your course 10 degrees south to the light ahead. He quickly received a reply. Alter your course 10 degrees to the north.

The captain was furious that someone would have the audacity to say that to him. Sent another message. Alter your course 10 degrees south. I am a captain. And soon another reply was received.

Alter your course 10 degrees north. I am able seaman, first class, Jones, obviously Welsh. By now, the captain was apoplectic and sent a final message.

Alter your course 10 degrees south. I am a battleship. After a perfectly timed silence, the following reply was heard by all on the ship.

[9 : 27] Alter your course 10 degrees north. I am a lighthouse. I am a lighthouse. I didn't actually do that to prompt them. They were going to do it anyway.

I could see, I could see they were so excited to get that back in. But isn't this the case? If you are going to fight anybody, pick your fights. Don't fight with Gabriel.

And Zachariah would learn to regret his doubt. But God hadn't finished with him yet or his wonderful wife, Elizabeth. And it is not over.

Remember this. It is not over until God says it is over. Matthew 19.26 says this. If only they had heard this prior to that moment. And Jesus said, as he grew up, with man this is impossible, whatever it is.

But with God, all things are possible. Say that with me. All things are possible. And as we say it once more, think of that thing you're praying for now that you haven't heard the reply you wanted. [10:29] All things are possible. Zachariah faced serious consequences by doubting. And Gabriel said to him, And now you'll be silent, not able to speak until the day the baby is born, because you did not believe my words.

This good news which you will come, which will come true at their appointed time, the birth of his son. And at the birth of the son, it was declared that his name would be John, which was quite unusual because that wasn't the word, the name of anybody in the family and that's how they normally gave names to their children.

But that moment, they gave a writing tablet to Zachariah and he wrote on it, His name is John, which astonished everybody. But immediately, his mouth was opened and his tongue was set free and he began to speak, praising God.

Next slide, please. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, What then is this child going to be? For the Lord's hand was with him. The passage that Martin read out, to be honest, we could spend weeks looking into the depths of that, but we don't have a lot of time today, so let me just go through some of those points.

For a start off, Zachariah, the Bible says, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied as he said these words. And it was a song of declaration, proclamation, rejoicing, and also getting into perspective, this child that God had miraculously given him and his wife, Elizabeth.

[12:08] It proclaims the dawning of the light of Jesus on all who will sit in darkness. Any of us who have given our hearts to Christ, been forgiven of our past, and have a relationship with God will know that to some degree and various degrees, we have all at once walked in darkness and we wouldn't dream of ever going back there.

We meet people in our motorcycle ministry with CMA who walk in darkness and they say so often that they're in that place and they can't come to God because God would never possibly love or forgive somebody like them.

But we can rejoice in saying that we are in the light as Christ is in the light. We are no longer in that place of darkness and what a difference it makes. Zachariah's son was a blessing of thanksgiving to Almighty God for his faithful promise to Abraham's descendants.

So many things that happened and still happen today to the Jewish nation. God's chosen. How God led them out of Egypt.

How God provided for them. How all the cities that they were to settle in in Canaan was given over to them but that God was their Father.

[13:32] As Christ came Jesus said to them said to us when you pray say Heavenly Father that was a completely different change of relationship that we can have through Christ.

He spoke of his son who would be the one who would prepare the way for Jesus. It was so exciting to see that second section of that song where he suddenly realises filled with the Holy Spirit that this is such a blessing much bigger than anything I'd ever expected.

So when we pray don't let's say to God do this. When we pray let's do this and say God we just open our hands and say receive from heaven whatever you will give us because heaven's perspective is so much bigger than ours.

His son would be the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah for Jesus and salvation would come to them from their enemies and from the hand of those who hate them.

It's no wonder the Jewish nation throughout history has been hated by the world is it? Because God chose them and the history of the people captives set free.

[14:46] He went on to say that God would show mercy to them and that they should serve God without fear in holiness and righteousness all the days of their lives.

All those who receive Christ through faith face persecution today still and willingly surrender their lives even to death for they knew of a greater blessing to come that of heaven.

But again Zechariah turns to address his son you my child will be called a prophet of the most high and that he will go on as Isaiah 40 said we have voice calling in the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord make straight in the desert a highway for our God and so similar is that to what we are to

do today.

We're not just to come to church and enjoy being part of this church family and doing what we do we are to go out and proclaim that there is a God proclaim that there is a Savior and the people who walk in darkness will see a great light when they put their trust in the living God for those who live in the land of deep darkness a light will shine.

That little bit on the screen is from Oh Holy Night a thrill of hope the weary world rejoices for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.

[16:18] When we go to bike rallies we're open 24 hours a day with our coffee marquee and there is a period of time after 4 o'clock when everybody who's drunk has finally gone to sleep and we're just kind of left on our own or one or two people might walk in but it's really dark it's like the darkness has fallen amongst all these folk and we're desperate for these 4 to 6 thousand people to know Christ and then as we pray we eventually see a slight chink of light rise in the sky as morning breaks.

I know it's amazing how many bikers come up albeit desperate for a coffee and say have you seen this sky? And I want to say but have you seen Jesus? Because you can have this perpetually and always until eternity.

I want to finish with the words of Ephesians 5 verse 8 to 14 it rounds this up so well Paul says to the church at Ephesus therefore to us as well he says this for you were once darkness but now you are light in the Lord so we are to live as children of light for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness righteousness and truth and find out what pleases the Lord isn't that great?

Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness but rather expose them it's shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret but everything exposed by the light becomes visible and everything that is illuminated becomes a light we don't have to live in darkness anymore that's why it said Paul wrote wake up sleeper rise from the dead we were once dead in our sin rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you and through you and the world will see the saviour has come let's pray shall we