

A
2020
ADVENT
AND
CHRISTMAS
DEVOTIONAL

READINGS FROM
THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

THE REVEREND JOHN D. YOST

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 29: FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. **LUKE 1:5-6**

Luke wraps his presentation of the Gospel of Jesus within the long history of the cultural and ritual traditions of God's calling of the people of Israel, namely of the law and commandments and the priestly order regulating the religious and civic lives of the people. We also remember our personal and collective histories through cultural and ritual traditions. But more than likely, due to a viral pandemic, our traditions around Advent and Christmas will be severely altered and tested this year, especially with regard to social gatherings. Nevertheless, we must remember that God has come to and continues to be with us in Christ Jesus amidst all life's challenges and uncertainties. Isaac Watts immortalized this hope: "O God, our help in ages past,/ our hope for years to come,/ our shelter from the stormy blast,/ and our eternal home." ELW 632

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 30

But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. **LUKE 1:7**

It is often said that children are the pathway to the future, hope and blessing embodied for a people aware of life's mortality. Luke does not give the reader any indication of Zechariah's and Elizabeth's feelings of having reached an advanced age without having any children. But steeped in Israel's history and remembrances stood the narrative of the blessing of many descendants bestowed upon Abraham and Sarah that came to them in their advanced years. God's promises break into our realities even against our reasoned expectations.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. **LUKE 1:8-10**

Zechariah was a servant of God attending to the duties to which he was called. We are called to be servants of God in our time and place, attending to the manner in which we honor God in our care of one another. Luther called this the "priesthood of all believers." In the narrative, Luke adds that "whole assembly of the people was praying." Chief of our service to God and one another is in prayer. Prayer for the whole people of God throughout God's creation.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 2

Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. **LUKE 1:11-12**

The biblical tradition reveals the many occasions when God breaks into our world through the voices of angels. This breaking-in often comes unexpectedly and often bearing fear among the recipients of the angel's presence. Angelic presence may deliver us from even the routine and mundane practices of our servanthood that we take for granted and offers a degree of comfort, ushering in new hope and profound joy. Sing "Angels, from the realms of glory,/ wing your flight o'er all the earth;/ once you sang creation's story,/ now proclaim Messiah's birth." ELW 275

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, **LUKE 1:13-14**

During this Advent season, we are confronted with numerous fears- the spread of an insidious viral disease, untimely deaths, the safety of many who work and provide care in dangerous situations. The list could go on-and-on. And yet God continues to speak to us: "Do not be afraid." As with Zechariah, God hears us, hears our cries, attends to our fears. New life will continue to break in, bearing the reality of God's promises even in the darkest of times. "O day full of grace that now we see appearing on earth's horizon,/ bring light from our God that we may be abundant in joy this season./ God shine for us now in this dark place;/ your name on our hearts emblazon." ELW 627

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 4

For he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." **LUKE 1:15-17**

The narrative is suffused with the miraculous. Zechariah is not dreaming. What he hears is the assurance of promise coming to life. Notice all the "he will's" in the story- "he will be great... he will be filled with the Holy Spirit... he will turn many to the Lord." Filled with the Holy Spirit, God's promise takes on flesh. "Gracious Spirit, heed our pleading/ fashion us all anew." ELW 401

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5

Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” **LUKE 1:18**

God continues to contend with the questions we pose back to God, filled with “how can this be” and “why is this happening.” We observe the reality of life through our senses, our remembrances and recollections, our assumptions and propositions, our projections of order and possibility. We rise with the abundance of the good; we falter in disappointment. In this Advent season, the cries of “how can this be” take on many forms. We ask of God for we know that God is our deliverer in times of need and trouble. May the uncertainties of dangerous times not deliver us into disbelief.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6, SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. **LUKE 1:19-21**

As we hear in this narrative, disbelief carries its own consequences. God’s will, God’s truth will not be swayed by unbelief. God can and will silence any and all of our objections to God’s presence and truth. We need acknowledge God’s sharpened response to our lack of trust, often in times of waiting. Luther penned this refrain: “Out of the depths I cry to you;/ O Lord God, hear me calling./ Incline your ear to my distress/ in spite of my rebelling.” ELW 600

MONDAY, DECEMBER 7

When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. **LUKE 1:22-23**

Even though Zechariah was unable to speak, the people perceived that he had had a vision from God from the sanctuary. During this Advent season, how will we perceive the visions of God visited upon us in the midst of the many challenges we face in this time of viral pandemic and social upheaval? And what will we take home with us?

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked

favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

LUKE 1:24-25

Gabriel's words have come to fulfillment. Elizabeth is pregnant with a child of promise. She realizes that God has favored her. This word of "favor" finds its way throughout this narrative, suggesting the manner in which God presents God's self to us by grace, an unsolicited favor but representative of the fullness of God's love and compassionate concern for God's people. Unrequited social disgrace is countered by God's grace. From the great hymn: "Come, thou Fount of ev'ry blessing,/ tune my heart to sing thy grace; streams of mercy, never ceasing,/ calls for songs of loudest praise." ELW 807

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women." **LUKE 1:26-28**

For the second time, a visitation from the angel Gabriel. But this time not to a childless elderly man but to a young engaged virgin. Again, the news is good with blessing and favor, but now delivered not in the expected sanctuary of the Temple but in a small, obscure town. God's favor often turns up in unexpected places and peoples, so beware and be alert!

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." **LUKE 1:29-30**

Mary is perplexed by the angel's greeting and message. She is moved to a state of pondering; perplexed, she sees a changed reality which is cause for adjustments of thought and feeling. Pondering is what we do in altered situations of our perceived realities, not unlike we are experiencing this Advent season. But all pondering of perceived changes in the reality we have come to know and experience are underscored through the divine presence of favor and hope.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 11

"And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." **LUKE 1:31-33**

As with the angelic prophecy to Zechariah about his son, the angel reveals to Mary the kind of son that she has conceived. Notice again the string of “he will’s”: He will be great... he will be called the Son of the Most High... he will reign forever... and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Our Advent and Christmas reflections, even in the shadow of darkness, point to the light of Christ, to who he is and what he is able to do and accomplish. After all, he is named Jesus. The focus hearkens back to and remembers Isaiah’s prophecy: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.” (9:6-7). Jesus is Son of God and son of David who will be born to exercise the eternal reign of God in and through Israel to all the nations.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” **LUKE 1:34-37**

Like Zechariah, Mary has her questions, questions related to the proprietary as well as to paternity. She knows who she is, and where she has been. So, her question is realistic from her perspective because the angelic pronouncement seems beyond both biology and biography. Again, “how can this be?” Particularly in this Advent season of the uncertain and the unpredictable, we will have our questions related to what we perceive from all the changes brought forth by a viral pandemic that alters understanding and protocol. In faith, may we entrust our questions to God the Holy Spirit who comes to us in our time of need.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 13, THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. **LUKE 1:38**

It is a mighty and terrifying thing to call out our presence before the Almighty God. Even more so, is it daunting for us to say that we will be in service to God. God will use us in service of the gospel and in extending loving care to one another. “Here I am, Lord. Let it be according to your word.” From the Beatles we remember: “When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me. Speaking words of wisdom, let it be. And in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me, speaking words of wisdom, let it be.” Mary, the servant of the Lord.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 14

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit **LUKE 1:39-41**

The gospel writer does not reveal why Mary visited Elizabeth, only that she went with haste. Did she feel a need to be with family? Was the good news that she was holding more than she could bear herself? Did Mary seek Elizabeth's wisdom borne through the years? Was Mary running from or running to, was it escape or sanctuary? How do we process the news that comes to us, worldly or angelic? How do we process the calling we receive from God; how does it uproot us? How does it give us firm-footing? Upon receiving Mary in her presence, Elizabeth becomes filled with the Holy Spirit in the moment that even her unborn child becomes aware of the grace and greatness visited upon this home. May our hearts leap for joy at God's presence.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15

And she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." **LUKE 1:42-45**

God promises. God blesses. God fulfills. And we recognize; we become aware of the miraculous. And we participate with faith. And we will see the face of God even in the unborn. And we will speak of possibility, of what will yet be because of the way God comes to us in our homes, in our hearts. Rowan Williams, the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, in his poem Advent Calendar, writes: "He will come like frost./ One morning when the shrinking earth/ opens on mist, to find itself/ arrested in the net/ of alien, sword-set beauty./ He will come, will come,/ will come like crying in the night, like blood, like breaking,/ as the earth writhes to toss him free,/ He will come like a child."

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. **LUKE 1:46-49**

When we receive the good news of God, even in turbulent times, it is time to sing, to sing like Mary, to sing of God's grace and the ways God finds favor in us. So, sing today, sing holy, sing sure.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17

“His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

LUKE 1:50-55

Mary's song of joy and salvation, commonly known as the Magnificat, elicits the signs and manifestations of the power and strength of God as a God of justice for all. Mary's own humility in her low estate, reveals God's regard for the lowly of the world, for all who hunger. Her song of salvation attends to the public and social dimensions of life before God. God's concerns attend to the manner in which justice and righteousness is meted out in the world in which we live. Our Advent reflections as we move closer and closer to Christmas call upon us to be distributors of justice and peace, particularly in places where words of deceit, distress, and division can be heard.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” **LUKE 1: 56-61**

Naming is crucial and essential. Naming attends to belief and reveals truth. Naming forgoes self-interest and attaches itself to God's promise and will. John he is for he has a calling and a mission for which to prepare and to bring about a fulfillment of God's plan. We bear the name Christian collectively as we too are called in preparedness of mission and purpose. Even as our Advent lives have been excruciatingly challenged this year, may the name we have as Christian enable and empower us in the way of hope, of reconciliation and peace, of good character and courage in all times and places.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19

Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him. **LUKE 1:62-66**

The naming of John elicits amazement and fear. Consternation and conversation ensue. Wonder and wonderment at hand. "What then will this child become?" The miraculous observed in the present will lead to questions about the future with regard to the revealing of God's promise and purpose. It bears the complexity of faith and reason, of belief and practice. St. Bonaventure shared the prospect of this collective: "Do not assume that mere/ Reading will suffice without fervor,/ Speculation without devotion,/ Investigation without admiration,/ Observation without Exaltation,/ Industry without piety,/ Knowledge without love,/ Understanding without humility,/ Study without divine grace."

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20, FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. **LUKE 1:67-71**

Zechariah's canticle to his son, John, follows the pattern of Jewish blessing prayers, the "berakah." Praise is given to God for God's favor and redemption as Zechariah, too, is filled with the Holy Spirit and, therefore, is enabled to rightly praise God. Even in times like we are now experiencing due to a viral pandemic, may the Holy Spirit enable us to give God praise, for in Christ Jesus we are God's redeemed people.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 21

"Thus, he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. **LUKE 1:72-75**

Zechariah acknowledges that the promise of God's merciful actions was observed in the covenants God established with Abraham and the calling of the people of Israel. Now, the restoration of God's people and the liberation from the hands of enemies will proceed through the preparatory mission of John the Baptist, and involves the forgiveness of sin to make way for the coming of Christ. Advent calls upon us to confess our sin as we prepare to meet Christ in our lives.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 22

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel. **LUKE 1:76-80**

In a world full of turbulence and discord, it is Christ Jesus that will lead us into the way of peace. It is Christ Jesus who has the authority to pull us away from sin and guide us into light everlasting. In him, righteousness and peace come together. “Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.”

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 23

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. **LUKE 2:1-5**

The good news of the birth of Jesus comes against the backdrop of a people living under the rule of a foreign power. The experience of faith wrested against political machinations and maneuvering. Religion bordering the political. As Christians, we are called to trust God in Christ above all else. But is that the case? Do we place ourselves under the lordship of Christ Jesus, or do we submit to political personalities and preferences? Augustus and Rome or Jesus and Bethlehem? From the pen of Phillips Brooks: “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!/ Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;/ yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light./ The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” ELW 279

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24, CHRISTMAS EVE

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" **LUKE 2:6-14**

John's Gospel acclaims: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... And the Word became flesh and lived among us; and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth." Jesus, Lord and Savior. Again, time to sing: "What child is this, who laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?/ Whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherds watch are keeping?/ This, this is Christ the king, whom shepherds guard and angels sing;/ haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary!"

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 25, CHRISTMAS DAY

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So, they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. **LUKE 2:15-20**

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her king;/ let ev'ry heart prepare him room and heav'n and nature sing, and heav'n and nature sing."

GOD'S BLESSINGS AND PEACE TO ALL!