

It is my privilege to kick off the first Sunday of Advent. We've titled this series Prepare Him Room. Advent means arrival or signifies the start of an event or the arrival of a person. In Christian communities around the world, Advent refers to the four-week season before Christmas when we remember and prepare to celebrate the arrival of Jesus on earth.

Advent also has a future aspect to it. It's the idea that not only are we looking back with gratitude at his first coming, but we're looking forward to his second coming when he restores all things and unites the new heaven and earth someday for all of eternity. The longer I'm a Christian, the more I come to understand how important it is for me to prepare my heart and mind for Christmas.

It's this idea of preparing him room to make space in our lives this Advent season so we can be attentive to God, and what he wants to reveal to us. Then we respond to that. My prayer for all of us is that we will be serious this year about our heart preparation and that the Christmas season won't crowd out the space in our hearts that's meant for Jesus.

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 worshipers 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. 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. 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."

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. 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. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people." Luke 1:5:25

I've heard it said that the story of Jesus' birth in the gospels is filled with history, divinity, and mystery. So, in the next three weeks, we're going to see this history, divinity, and mystery unfold. I love the angel's announcement in the next chapter when he says, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10). This story is not just written to the elites as the audience. It's for the ordinary people. It was great news for all the people! We're going to see that God picks ordinary men and women to bear witness to the birth of the Savior of the world.

We're going to get to know this man, Zachariah. He was an ordinary man. As I studied this Advent passage, I was reminded that the needs, hopes, and fears of ordinary people are not forgotten. God is at work. He was at work then, and he is at work today. Be encouraged. Your needs, hopes, and fears are not forgotten by God. He has not forgotten you. He is still at work today. If you are experiencing a dark season, know this: God is at work in dark times.

"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" (v. 5). Just that phrase

that Luke uses here “in the time of King Herod” reveals a lot. Luke not only was a doctor, but he was also a historian. You see it as he shares his primary sources as he wrote this gospel. This takes place at a particular time and at a particular place in history.

Herod, King of Judah, was also known as Herod the Great. We might know him more by that name, but he was not great because of his moral character. He was cruel. He was suspicious. He was vindictive. It was said about Herod that in his presence, no woman’s honor was safe, and no man’s life was secure.

His greatness was because he was a talented builder. I’ve been to Israel twice in my life. Every day that we would go out and explore, we came across the ruins of another palace or summer home or some sort of monument that Herod built. One was the Caesarea Maritima, built on the Mediterranean coast. It’s a beautiful place. The city was the Roman capital of that whole region. It had this deep-water harbor. It had a temple, a summer home, and a monument, all that Herod built.

Then there was the Herodium. That was interesting to me. It is a mountain with a palace that was on it. It was built as a fortress, and it was lavish. It was a lavish tribute to his fame. Herod used slaves to manually build this mountain. Because he had a God complex, he wanted his subjects to know that he could move mountains.

Then there was the crowning jewel, Jerusalem’s temple. Herod claimed he loved the title King of the Jews. He expanded the Temple Mount to 35 acres. He reinforced its walls, and he built the famous Western Wall, or what we know today as the Wailing Wall. His crowning achievement was the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem and restoring the glory of Solomon’s Temple. He finished the project about 20 years before Jesus was born.

Herod was appointed by Rome. He may have had some Jewish blood in his lineage, but he was loyal to the Roman emperor. He liked the title King of the Jews, but he ruled more like King Nero of Rome. He was the one who ordered the soldiers to kill all the baby boys two years and under after he had heard the prophecies and whispering about a baby being born in Bethlehem who was in King David’s lineage and was the legitimate king of the Jews. He was right. The baby Jesus was the greatest threat to what he saw as his divine right as King of the Jews.

So these were dark days. After the last words of the last book of the Old Testament—Malachi—God went silent for 400 years until where we are in the text this morning. It seemed like the people for 400 years continued to pray their prayers, but God wasn’t hearing them. It felt like God had forgotten and abandoned them. It was as if he was no longer honoring the promise, the oath that he made to their ancestors of the savior who was to come. But God was working behind the scenes.

The 400 years of silence was about to be broken. Darkness was about to be invaded with light, and God was no longer going to be silent. He was going to speak. So, if you find yourself in a dark time today, I hope you are encouraged and assured that God is still working, he’s with you, and he’s working for you behind the scenes.

In one of the most familiar Psalms, David says, *“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me”* (Psalm 23:4). God is working in the darkness. Not only that, God is working with ordinary people.

Zachariah and Elizabeth now enter our story, and just the meaning of their names sheds light on what is to come. God will no longer be silent. He’s at work. That name Zachariah means the Lord remembers again. And Elizabeth means my God keeps his promises. Could there be any better names for people who are about to land right in the middle of God executing his greatest plan for mankind?

So Zachariah was a Jewish priest. A little priest history: there were 24 divisions of Jewish priests in Israel at the time of Jesus’ birth. It was estimated that there were about 20,000 priests in and around Jerusalem. They worked on rotation. That’s a lot of priests! That would be hard to manage. That’s a lot of cooks in the kitchen. Too many to manage. Imagine 20,000 pastors trying to come together on something. So, they worked on this rotation of two one-week assignments per year. They were summoned to Jerusalem to work and serve in the temple.

Luke tells us that Zechariah was in the 8th division, named Abijah. He then tells us a little about Elizabeth and her pedigree. She was a descendant of Aaron, so the priesthood was in her blood. They most likely lived in the hills of Judea, not too far from Jerusalem. And they were not rich, I’m sure. They probably lived in a small town and paid their bills with some grapes, sheep, and maybe some olive trees.

Luke says this: *“Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly”* (v. 6). The scripture tells us that they practiced their religion faithfully. They prayed for the Messiah to come. Zachariah prayed as his ancestors had prayed for 400 years.

He probably served in his little village in the local synagogue and taught on the Sabbath regularly. Like everyone else, they had needs, hopes, and fears. As ordinary people, they had doubts, like we all have. I can imagine that, at times, they would say, “Does God even hear our prayers for our nation anymore? Does God even hear our personal prayers anymore? God, we’re hurting, we’re disappointed, and we’re suffering.”

There was another thing. Something deeply important to Zachariah and Elizabeth. Something was lacking in their lives, *“But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive,*

and they were both very old" (v. 7). We all have friends, family, and loved ones who suffer from infertility. Elizabeth could not have children. We've seen this in scripture. Remember Sarah and Abraham? Or how about Hannah, who eventually gave birth to the prophet Samuel?

Imagine the heartfelt prayers of Zachariah and Elizabeth as they held hands and prayed and brought their needs before the Lord, day after day, month after month, year after year. And now they're very old. The original meaning of well stricken in years was being far beyond any hope of having children. God has not answered their prayers.

To make this even more unbearable, the general belief at the time of Jesus was that if a couple could not have children, they were suffering some kind of punishment from a secret sin or curse on them. So imagine the sorrow and the feelings of disgrace. The town gossip would be that God was punishing them with infertility. Because if God was pleased with them, they would be blessed with many children. But now God is moving, and something was about to happen to these ordinary people. A special once-in-a-lifetime honor from God was to fall on Zachariah.

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 worshipers were praying outside. Luke 1:8-10

So, every single male born into the family of Aaron was automatically a priest. Each priest was expected to serve a one-week period twice a year from Sabbath to Sabbath. They spaced the weeks six months apart, Sabbath to Sabbath, around holy events like Passover or Pentecost, or the Feast of the Tabernacles. It's not a bad job if you could get it.

With 20,000 priests in the lottery, most priests over the course of their lifetime would never be selected for the honor of being the ones to go into the holy place and burn the incense. Burning the incense is what every priest hoped for. It was kind of like living out your whole baseball career only in the minor leagues and waiting and hoping to be called up into the majors, even if it's just one week. It would make their career.

When Zachariah reported for duty, he picked a lot. The lot would tell him where he would be serving and where he would go. By God's providence, Zachariah was called up to the majors. He was picked to burn the incense in the temple. He won the lottery. Elizabeth probably invited friends and neighbors to join those assembled worshipers outside. If they could have shot video or taken pictures, they would have done that. They probably had a nice dinner planned in Jerusalem after the event to celebrate. Finally, the day arrives.

Let me quickly describe the temple on the temple mount for you. There was the Gentile courts where anyone could hang out. There was a court of Jewish women where only Jewish women and Jewish men could go there as well and hang out. And then there was a court of Jewish men where no women or Gentiles could go. If you go further in there was a special inner sanctum known as the holy place. And this is where the priests would go. Even deeper in, there was an inner sanctum called the holy of holies. Only the high priest could go in there once a year on the day of atonement.

So, in this holy place where priests could go, Zachariah would walk in, and what he would see right in front of him was this little golden altar where the incense was to be burned, and to his left would be a large candelabra with seven candles, and then on the right there would be a special table with 12 loaves of bread symbolizing the 12 tribes of Israel. So Zachariah would have the honor of going into that holy place. His job was to carry a bowl of hot coals and place it on the altar and then take a fistful of incense and place it on the coals.

The incense would symbolize the prayers of God's people. It would be a sweet aroma that would fill the nostrils of God. He would experience the pleasure of hearing the prayers of repentant and contrite people and people who were praising him for who he is and what he's done.

So then Zechariah would lay down on his face before the altar and pray for the people. He wasn't supposed to linger in the holy place for very long. He was to come out of the temple and then address the crowd of worshipers of those praying outside the holy place. The priest often would offer a benediction. They would probably offer one that we're familiar with.

**"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."
Numbers 6:24-26**

But that's not what happened. It didn't go as planned. What happened was God revealed that he was at work in dark times and in ordinary people. Now, he reveals that he's at work through a gift of the Son. God keeps his promises.

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. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. Luke 1:11-13

Now, I believe in angels. Angels are all throughout Scripture. I have likely crossed paths with an angel and did not even know it. And you've likely also bumped into an angel in your life and maybe not known it. I think there's a lot of angel stories around this church. If we were to ask folks here for their angel stories, I

think we're going to hear some amazing stories that have happened over the course of our lives.

Zachariah knew immediately that an angel was standing just to the right of that altar of incense. Luke says Zachariah was gripped with fear. When you think of an angel, maybe you think of a little cuddly kind of cherub, but this was nothing like that. This creature was awesome. This created being was presented to God, who was a messenger of God, one who fought off demons. One who serves the church. The angel spoke these words, and it just reveals itself here.

He's basically saying to Zachariah not to be afraid. After 400 years of silence and darkness, God now speaks. Light enters the darkness. The silence is broken. God chose them to have a son who would bless Israel in ways they could not imagine.

I don't want us to skip over the significance of God instructing him to name the baby John. In that culture, the father had the authority to name his own son. And he would usually name him his name. What is happening here is that this naming of the child reveals that the baby is set apart. God has special authority over him, and God was naming him John, which means gracious. He will also name Joseph and Mary's son, Jesus, which means God saves set apart.

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. vv. 14-15.

The angel is saying that John will not only be a delight and joy to his parents, but he will be a delight and a joy to all who have needs, hopes, and fears. He'll grow up to be a godly man, a great man. There'll be no doubt that he is filled with the Holy Spirit.

He will bring 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." vv. 16-17

So, John will prepare Israel to meet their Messiah. He will speak with the power of the great prophet Elijah. As parents hear John's message, they will turn to God, and they will turn back to their children and raise them in the ways of the Lord. Zechariah's probably standing there shaking and maybe just clutching his heart by this time. Remember, he is advanced in years. And the angel continues to describe John. He will preach to the foolish and the disobedient, and they will repent and become wise and righteous. He will be the greatest of all prophets. That's how Jesus described him. He will prepare Israel and then the entire world for the coming of the Messiah, Christ the King.

I'm comforted by Zachariah's response to this. Remember, he was a righteous man. He served, he prayed, and he loved his

wife. He was honest. He was moral. He believed in God. And yet, after all these years, he's now confronted in this amazing way with divinity and mystery. This whole event was arranged by God, and Zachariah gives this very unusual response.

"Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.'" (v. 18). So an angel, standing in this holy place, tells Zachariah all of this and Zachariah response is "How can I know this? I need something else." He had to be thinking the angel came to the wrong place for the wrong person.

As I was reading this passage, I started thinking, "I'm becoming well stricken in years." We were visiting our grandsons over Thanksgiving. My clothes are covering up the bruises I got from wrestling on the floor. Little boys can be so different from girls. People would say that, and I didn't believe it because I only had daughters until my grandson came along. You know that Zachariah is thinking about this. He has been praying for this, but now he probably thinks he is too old to wrestle on the floor with his son. In a couple of years, he might even be too old to pick him up.

God is telling him through Gabriel the angel that he can be more sure about this than Zachariah can be sure of anything else. God sent him an angel for goodness sake. You would think Zachariah would say, "Okay, whatever you say. I'm all in. This is awesome." But you have to understand, and maybe we can relate to this: in Zachariah's world, God had been silent for so long. The pain had been real for so long.

In his old age, in his years of disappointment, he struggled to believe that God remembers, and he struggled to believe that God keeps his promises. Can you relate? Are you here this first Sunday in Advent, believing in God? It's a struggle because our ongoing needs, fears, and hopes make it difficult to believe.

You're not alone. I'm comforted because if a righteous servant like Zachariah responds poorly and God still works in his life, there's hope for you and me. I want Advent to be a recommitment for me. As I was processing this, I'll confess to you that I believe in God. I have believed in God for 30-plus years. But I get so entangled in my needs, hopes, and fears and recognize dark times that I don't live like I believe God. I believe in God, but I struggle to believe God. And that's what the angel is telling Zachariah to do. "I know you believe in God but believe God right now." We need to believe that God is working in our lives for his purposes.

I can see the angel with his hands on his hips here, just shaking his head. *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" (v. 19).* He wasn't just any other angel. He is an archangel. An archangel's normal place is in the presence of God. In the past, he delivered one of the most important messages, one of

the most important prophecies to Daniel, and he will go on to deliver the most important message to Mary.

He was now delivering this message to Zachariah. He was proclaiming good news to him and to Israel. Good news to the entire world. These words that the angel spoke to Zachariah were the exact words that he'd longed to hear. And instead of expressing thankfulness, he expressed fear. Instead of showing trust, he was filled with questions.

Look what happens next. *"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"* (v. 20). "Zachariah, you're going to just be quiet for a while, and I want you to watch God work." Another mystery about this whole thing is that God finally spoke after 400 years, and he spoke to a man who won't be able to speak for nine months.

He's going to go home and can't talk to his wife for nine months. Maybe Zachariah was used to doing most of the talking at home, but now he's only able to sit and listen to his wife. Maybe this answered another prayer of Elizabeth's, I don't know. She can talk for nine months uninterrupted.

God is disciplining Zachariah with silence. Imagine a priest or a pastor unable to speak for nine months. Really good soul work was ahead for Zachariah. He was forced to listen, to reflect, to be attentive to God, and to pray. People aren't usually praised for being good talkers. They're praised for being good listeners. Silence allows us to be attentive, listen to God's word, be faithful, wait, and make room for him to get things worked out.

For Zechariah, it's to prepare him to raise a son. It's to reignite him to believe God. It's to discipline him. It's for him to learn how to enjoy his son, teach his son, and discipline his son. It is to ponder God's miracle in his life. God answers prayers. He answers prayers in his own way and in his own time: even in dark times, even when our doubts loom larger than our faith, even in the middle of a confusing time of deep disappointment, be reminded that there's probably something to learn. Zachariah is an old man, but there's something for him to learn. He's going to learn in this time how to relate to God in a deeper way through silence and waiting.

So what happens next? Remember, the worshipers are waiting outside for the blessing. It's taking him a long time to come out of there. They're probably wondering if he died in there.

"Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 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. vv. 21-22

I'm picturing charades as he's trying to describe what went on in there. He's trying to explain all this, but he can't speak.

"When his time of service was complete, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion." (v. 23-24). Elizabeth said, "The Lord has done this for me." That should have been Zachariah's response in the temple. *"In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people"* (v. 25). So you look at the difference between Zachariah's response and Elizabeth's response. We can relate to Zachariah, but we should be inspired by Elizabeth. She doesn't just believe in God. She believes God, and rejoices in what he did.

I tried to imagine a few takeaways here of what Zachariah must be pondering. And I trust that through this, the Holy Spirit may be prompting you to reflect on some things. We are going to take a couple of minutes of silence as part of our first week of Advent to reflect on some of these truths. Hopefully, one of these truths will speak especially to your circumstances and the situation you're in right now. Even the most faithful people struggle with doubt.

- 1. God is always faithful to fulfill his promises, even when circumstances seem impossible.**
- 2. Even a person who has believed in God for many years may still have more to learn so they can know God more deeply.**
- 3. God speaks clearly through his word. Be careful not to doubt his word.**
- 4. Even when God's timing seems delayed or his promises impossible, he is at work behind the scenes.**

May the Holy Spirit speak to you right now. Spend some time reflecting on these four things. We're encouraging you to make him room. I want to encourage you to make him room every day in this first week of Advent. Let's go before the Lord in silence.

The scripture goes on to tell us that when Elizabeth gave birth, their neighbors and relatives were filled with joy. On that eighth day, when the baby was about to be circumcised, they needed to publicly name him. And Zachariah did this:

Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. vv. 62-64

There's a next portion of scripture, which is called Zachariah's song. It's Zachariah writing about this experience.

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,

because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

**He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David**

(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all our
days.

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 the knowledge of salvation

through the forgiveness of their sins,

because of the tender mercy of our God,

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.”

And the child grew and became strong in spirit;
and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared
publicly to Israel. vv. 67-80

Remember the promises and the names of Zachariah and Elizabeth. The Lord remembers. The Lord keeps his promises. And the promise that was made was that a new covenant would come through God's Son, Jesus Christ.

The new covenant was established on a cross where Jesus died for our sins. The new covenant was established not through the law, not through religion, but through a relationship. A Spirit-filled relationship with Jesus. Jesus is the one John promised would come, and that promise came true. The one that God sent to take away the sins of the earth, to pay the penalty that we deserve, is Jesus.

And he's the one we remember with the elements of bread and juice. You hear from servers when picking up your elements, "This is the body of Christ given for you. This is the blood of Christ shed for you." When John saw Jesus approaching him, as Jesus was about to begin his public ministry and was being obedient to the Father to be baptized, John pointed to Jesus and said, "Look, the Lamb of God who has taken away the sins of the world."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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