

DECEMBER 13—Fifteenth Day of Advent

LUKE 1:57-80

57Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. 58When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her. 59So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. 60His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John." 61But they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name." 62So they made signs to his father—what he would have him called. 63And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John." So they all marveled. 64Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God. 65Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea. 66And all those who heard them kept them in their hearts, saying, "What kind of child will this be?" And the hand of the Lord was with him.

67 Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

68 "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel,
For He has visited and redeemed His people,
69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of His servant David,
70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,
Who have been since the world began,
71 That we should be saved from our enemies
And from the hand of all who hate us,
72 To perform the mercy promised to our fathers
And to remember His holy covenant,
73 The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:
74 To grant us that we,
Being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
Might serve Him without fear,
75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.
76 "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;
For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,
77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people
By the remission of their sins,
78 Through the tender mercy of our God,
With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;
79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace."
80 So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

There are four "New Testament Psalms" in the book of Luke which the Church has sung throughout its history, particularly during Advent. Their names are taken from the first word of each song in the Latin Vulgate translation: "The Magnificat" sung by Mary—"My soul *magnifies* the Lord" —Luke 1:4-6; "The Benedictus" sung by Zechariah—"Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel"—Luke 1:67-69; "The Gloria in Excelsis" sung by the angels—"Glory to God in the highest"—Luke 2:13-14; and "The Nunc Dimittis" sung by Simeon—"Now let Your servant *depart*, O Lord"—Luke 2:22-32. The song before us today, "The Benedictus" is a revelation from God. Zacharias was "filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied..." (v. 67). He does not speak as a private individual but as a prophet in Israel, to Israel. His son, John the Forerunner, will be the last of the Old Covenant prophets. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. Zechariah's sings of God's action on behalf of His people (vv. 68-75). John's mission would be specifically to "go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways" (Mal. 3:1), and "to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins" (vv. 76-77).

Something was wrong with the world: people were *suffering*. Wicked foreigners had come from far away, with hatred in their eyes and weapons in their hands. Darkness and death had stalked the land. If you lived in Israel during this period, and you were a godly person, you would especially be concerned about the *spiritual* conditions around you, formalism in worship, and emptiness of profession. But there is still somehow a *larger hope*—a sense that even though

much has gone wrong, and much is still going wrong, things can still be put right. Things *will* be put right. There are many in Israel who have *not* lost hope, who are trusting God and seeking to live for him—Elizabeth and Zacharias, Simeon and Anna, Joseph and Mary. Zacharias has pondered the agony and the hope for many years, and he now finds both the agony and the hope bubbling out of him as he looks in awe and delight at his baby son John, named as Zacharias’ tongue is loosed. “Benedictus” is a poem about God acting at last, finally doing what He promised many centuries ago, and doing it at a time when His people had had their fill of hatred and oppression. Zechariah praises God for having provided salvation for His people, in fulfillment of prophecy and of His holy covenant with Abraham. And Zechariah sings of his child’s mission as the one who will prepare the way for the Messiah. “*Blessed is the Lord God of Israel*” (Psa. 72:18; 111:9). Imagine yourself in Zechariah’s position: seeing the fulfillment of the oldest promise in the O.T., the promise of a Redeemer (Gen.3:15). The Redeemer was specifically promised to the seed of Abraham, the Covenant race. The Lord has “visited” His people, “visited” because the God had come to His people Israel when they were in desperate straits, as they were at the time of the Exodus and the time of the captivity. They were so sunk in disaster, so crushed under a heap of woes that no one thought God’s blessing was upon them. God has “raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David.” (Psa. 132:14-18; Ex.27:2, 30:2-3; Ex.29:12; Lev.4:7, 18). With the destruction of the throne of David and the dispersion of the people, the hope of salvation in particular had fallen. Now, the tabernacle of David was going to be raised up again and established. This promise has to do with “the oath which He swore to our father Abraham.” God had called the descendents of Abraham to be the priest to the nations (Gen.17:7; Lev. 26:42; Psa. 105:8; Micah 7:20)

—Pastor Mickey Schneider, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Valparaiso, Florida

PRAYER

O Lord, remind us in this Advent season, that You sent John the Forerunner to prepare the way for the Messiah, and that *all* of our children are given to us as a gift from Your hand. When we read that “the hand of the Lord was with him,” we ask that Your hand will be upon our family and our children and that You will use us in the plan You have for the ages in Christ. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family what you ought to seek for your children and your children’s children in the light of the coming of the Messiah and the work of the forerunner. What is the portion we ought to seek for our children—that they be successful? Rich? Influential? It is good to have the hand of parents over them, the hand of teachers, pastors, elders, wise bosses; but it is still better to have “the hand of the Lord” upon them.

DECEMBER 14—Sixteenth Day of Advent

LUKE 2:1-7

1And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. 3So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. 4Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. 6So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. 7And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

If I were to ask you to tell me the story of the birth of Jesus, where would you fit the name “Quirinius” in? You would probably tell me about the shepherds and how there was no room at the inn. You might work in something about swaddling clothes and a manger, but you would probably be hard-pressed to shoehorn into the story much about the Syrian governor Quirinius. So would I. I can’t ever remember mentioning his name in my own tellings of the story. You probably don’t have a Governor Quirinius action figure to go along with your nativity scene. So why does Luke use up this precious real estate on the pages of the Bible telling us who was in charge at the time of Jesus’ birth? Well, one answer is that he is giving us a couple of historical landmarks by telling us who was caesar at the time, and who was governor, so that we remember that Jesus was a real man born into history. But that isn’t all.

We read these names, but then these guys don't matter for the rest of the story. We hear who the world leaders are, but the angels don't go to them. They aren't told that the savior is born in the city of David or about the babe lying in the manger. They don't even get to hear the song that the angels sing. They are left out of the loop, and in the dark. The new king had arrived, the new order was beginning, and the world leaders didn't even get a memo. Far outside the soft palaces and the luxurious comfort of these rulers' beds that night, in a barn, in a backwater town, a baby was born. Jesus' invasion of the kingdoms of men began. The Kingdom of God couldn't be conjured out of the powers and authorities that were already in place; they were weak and ineffectual for salvation. Deliverance has to come from the outside. Human systems and organizations need to be saved themselves, so they cannot offer deliverance. They are powerless to meet man's most fundamental needs, so Jesus must invade them and overturn them.

Therefore we cannot put our hope in princes or presidents, but in the King that was born in a stable. We pray for His advent. We pray that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We join with Him in His invasion of the kingdoms and organizations of men to bring them all under His dominion.

—Assistant Pastor Duane Garner, Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Monroe, Louisiana

PRAYER

Eternal Father, from whom all truth and justice proceeds: subdue the nations of the world, and grant them your peace. Hasten the time when the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss all the ways that the Kingdom is still breaking into the world, what other idols must yet fall, and how we should go about the business of overturning them.

DECEMBER 15—Seventeenth Day of Advent

LUKE 2:8-10

8Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. 10Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

In every Christmas pageant and every nativity scene there are always shepherds with staffs and lambs because of this part of the Bible. Shepherds and sheep show us about God's leaders and God's people and even God Himself. If we were to visit that hillside on the first Christmas Eve we would see that shepherds are ordinary folks with dirt under their fingernails and mud on their sandals. That night they were probably sitting around a campfire telling stories watching for dogs or wolves. Maybe they were talking about a very famous shepherd that lived in the same area, King David. Then suddenly they were very surprised and afraid because of the glory and light of the angel's presence. Wouldn't you be afraid if a bright cloud appeared from nowhere on a dark night outside? The angel probably looked like a bright-shining man in a cloud of light. Maybe the glory of God made the sound of rushing wind or water as it sometimes does (Acts 2). That would have been scary. But the angel speaks words they can understand and tells them not to be afraid. The angel is not there to hurt them or judge them because of their sin. Angels are messengers. He is there to tell them wonderful news that the one who is King David's heir, who will save them from their sin, has been born. The angel explains that this is a message of joy for all kinds of people. This angel does not come to King Herod in his palace or to the High Priest in the temple or to Caesar Augustus in Rome. The messages that come to these men will not be joyful. He does not announce this to the powerful people of the world, but to the ordinary and common people in the fields. The good news of Jesus' birth was announced with great glory, but not to glorious people, just to regular farmers caring for smelly animals like sheep and goats. It is amazing that God chooses these ordinary shepherds to be the first people to tell the good news to others (Luke 2:17).

—Pastor Gregg Strawbridge, All Saints Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, Pennsylvania

PRAYER

Our Father in heaven, you are our Shepherd and we are your sheep who always need your care. We thank you that for using ordinary people to tell your good news, even as you used those first shepherds to seek out the baby Jesus and tell of His birth. Help us follow their example of listening to the announcement of Jesus and then to telling others about Him. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss these questions: Why do you think God used ordinary people, like shepherds, instead of Herod or Caesar? Does God still use people like farmers? What kinds of people's God using in your life to help you learn about Jesus?

DECEMBER 16—Eighteenth Day of Advent

LUKE 2:11-14

11 “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 14 “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

The text we have just read is the famous announcement from the angel of Yahweh to the shepherds that the Savior has been born in the city of David. The city of David is Bethlehem, and Bethlehem is near where Jacob's wife Rachel died while giving birth to Benjamin (Gen. 35:19) as well as where Ruth returns with Naomi after God visits His people with bread (Ruth 1:6, 19). Both stories are about women in desperation, experiencing trials related to childbearing, facing death and famine. The angel announces that something wonderful has happened in the city of David, and it has to do with the birth of a child who is the Messiah. The angel also gives the shepherds a sign. Signs first appear in the Bible when God calls the sun, moon, and stars “signs,” but later the rainbow, circumcision, plagues, the Sabbath, miracles, the law, and prophecies are called “signs.” In the Bible, signs are not merely locators to show you where you are, signs are places where God speaks with authority and marks His intentions. Signs should be seen by people, and they should provoke faith and repentance and love for God. Perhaps part of what the angel means has to do with who the shepherds are themselves. Twice in our text the angel says “to you” or “for you.” That the Savior of the world should be found in a cattle stall, in a barn, would be particularly meaningful to shepherds. It was a sign *for them* because they would find their Savior in the very sort of place they would be likely to go. The Savior had come *for them*, and the proof was that He was lying in a feeding trough, as though He were food. The text says that immediately the heavenly host appeared, praising God. The heavenly host is the army of God; we call upon this army to praise God whenever we sing the Doxology. At Christmas, we sing *Angels We Have Heard on High*, joining our voices to that heavenly army praising God, announcing peace to shepherds in a field in the middle of the night. This text reminds us that God's power is made perfect in weakness; the army of God sings praises and announces the birth of the Lord of heaven who has been born in a barn. God has visited His people in Bethlehem again, and He has come to be the bread of life *for them*.

—Pastor Toby Sumpter, Trinity Church, Moscow, Idaho

PRAYER

Gracious Father, we thank you that you sent your Son to break the curse of sin. We thank you that in His birth, He was the greater Obed who brings life to a dead and dying world. We ask that you would remind us again and again that the birth of Jesus is *for us* and for our salvation so that we might continually join our voices to Your heavenly army. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family how the stories of Rachel, Naomi/Ruth, and Mary are similar. How is Jesus like Benjamin and Obed? Discuss how God has specifically met the needs of your family in various circumstances.

DECEMBER 17—Nineteenth Day of Advent

LUKE 2:15-16

15So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” 16And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

The angels had gone, the heavenly singing was over, and now the shepherds had to decide what to do. It didn't take them long. They had no doubts, for they were going to see “this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord made known to us,” but they desired to see for themselves nonetheless. It isn't enough to hear about Jesus. Our religion teaches us that we must each come to Him ourselves. This we do as we join with one another each Lord's Day and partake of His Word and sacrament with the same faith as the shepherds. There, we are also lifted up with the singing of the saints joined with the angels themselves in worship before Jesus Who, no longer a Babe, sits as our Resurrected Savior at the right hand of God the Father.

Making haste, they came to Mary and Joseph. There, they certainly shared stories of their visions and encounters, strengthening one another's faith over this wonderful event. And this is what we do as well when we gather together as a family or when we gather together as a church, encouraging one another with our stories of how God has met us, changed us, and fitted us for service in His kingdom.

—*Pastor Dave Hatcher, Trinity Church, Woodinville, Washington*

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we thank You for all the ways in which You encourage us and build us up in our faith, including this time of singing, reading Your Word and discussing Your work in our lives together. And we thank You for summoning us together each Lord's Day to do the same but with all the saints gathered together. Strengthen us again and let us strengthen one another for greater service to You for the sake of Jesus, in Whose name we pray, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

How might we do a better job of encouraging one another to “make haste” and come to Jesus each day? How might we do a better job of preparing ourselves and one another to “make haste” in our gathering on the Lord's Day? Discuss the fact that kings were not first brought to Jesus, but rather ordinary people, even simple shepherds.

DECEMBER 18—Twentieth Day of Advent

LUKE 2:17–20

17Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. 18And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 19But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Shepherds. Day and night, watching sheep, feeding sheep, protecting sheep, guiding sheep, and otherwise doing whatever else the care of sheep calls for. Not exactly what one would call a “glorious” job. This was just the case with the shepherds in the field at Bethlehem, as they “watched their flocks by night.” They did not hold high positions in the local city government. They were not religious leaders to whom people looked for theological answers or spiritual direction. They were not the intellectuals of the day, seeking to spearhead cultural change. They were just plain, ordinary sheep-herders, doing their jobs on a typical “winter’s” night.

Yet, despite all their relative unimportance to the rest of the world, it was these humble shepherds whom God chose for the incredible honor of being the first men not only to see the miracle of God come in the flesh but to announce it to the world as well. In the same way, God chose the humble maiden Mary to carry His Son in her womb. Just a simple “peasant” girl, yet the Bible says she is to be honored above all women.

As He often does, God exalted the simple and humble to be the first among men to know and proclaim the great coming of Christ our Savior. This is a wonderful thing. And if God used at the outset simple shepherds and maidens to bring the gospel into the world, He surely can use you and me as well in building the kingdom of God today.

—Pastor Bill Izard, *Grace Covenant Church, Texarkana, Arkansas*

PRAYER

Great God in heaven above, we give You thanks for Your own Son who took on the flesh of a newborn baby in order to save the world of men. We give You thanks for Your choosing the weak and the lowly to be a vibrant witness to the waiting world. Thank You for the shepherds who first “preached” the gospel that has now come to us. Thank You for humble Mary who carried God-Become-Man in her womb. Now hear our prayer: Make us faithful bearers of the Gospel ourselves, weak and helpless as we are. Fill our hearts with the joy of the shepherds, our minds with the ponderings of Mary, and loose our tongues to sing Your praises for the wonderful thing You have done in sending Your Son to be our Savior, in whose name we pray, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Even the smallest child or the quietest family can help spread the good news of Christ’s coming to save the world by celebrating His birth loudly, proudly, and publicly. Plan with your family to carol in the neighborhood or at a local nursing home, throw a party, give gifts to others, etc.; and brainstorm other ways both to celebrate and spread the gospel this Christmas season.

DECEMBER 19—Twenty-First Day of Advent

LUKE 2:25-32

25And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. 27So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, 28he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said:

29“Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace,

According to Your word;

30For my eyes have seen Your salvation

31Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples,

32 A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles,

And the glory of Your people Israel.”

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

During Jesus’ ministry, He was known to have picked up little children and hold them in His arms. He would hold them and bless them (Mark 9:36; 10:16). Jesus welcomed the little children (Mark 10:14) then and now, and this is

wonderful. However, there was a time when Jesus Himself was a little child and someone scooped Him up in his arms and uttered a blessing (Luke 2:28). This man's name was Simeon, and he is the man we just read about. Simeon had been waiting to see Jesus, and some think that he was a very old man by this time. We really do not know how old he was, but from his words, we know he is ready to die, and die in peace: "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word" (2:29). Here was Simeon, holding the baby Jesus in his arms and calling upon the Lord. Simeon's eyes looked upon the salvation that had been promised, and was now (somehow!) in his arms. The Holy Spirit had assured Simeon that he would not die before seeing the promised Messiah, "the Consolation of Israel."

"And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ."

Simeon had longed to see this day, he lived for it, and he would now peacefully die because of it. It was on that very same day that Joseph and Mary and Jesus were in the temple to offer a sacrifice when the Spirit sent Simeon into the temple too. This is when he met Jesus.

For Simeon, this was a day of life and death, and life. Simeon looked in the face of Jesus; and as he did so he was full of life *and* ready to die. Simeon was holding Life in his arms, while at the same time he was approaching death. The Lord's promises have been realized (again!); and while the dying face of Simeon is looking into the face of Jesus, he proclaims that this life is not some simple and private matter only for one elderly man. No, this is for the entire world: "a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel."

—Pastor Jeff Niell, Emmanuel Covenant Church, Glendale, Arizona

PRAYER

Grant, O Lord, that we adhere to Jesus, the Savior of the nations, with a tenacity throughout our years, so that we may present to You a heart of wisdom. Train us in our youth and sustain us in our old age so that we may love You and display our confidence in Your promises. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Noting the example of Simeon, discuss the importance of living lives of devotion based upon the sure word of the Lord, asking how this promotes confidence in life and death.