

John the Baptist and the Promise

Luke 1:5-25

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Between this Sunday and next Sunday, I plan to preach 4 sermons on this first chapter of Luke's gospel. I thought that this would be suitable for us on the 2 Sundays before Christmas.

The 4 weeks before Christmas are typically called the advent season. Advent has to do with waiting for the coming of Christ. The word "advent" refers to the coming of Christ. It refers both to the first coming of Christ, which is his birth, as well as the second coming of Christ, which will take place at the end of the age. During advent the church has typically reflected on the idea of waiting for the coming of Christ as well as the great significance of both the first and second comings of our Lord.

Now the celebration of an advent season is not required by the Bible. Neither is the celebration of the birth of Christ on December 25th. Some of our forefathers resisted these celebrations for this reason. But today most Christians enter into the celebration of the birth of Christ during the Christmas season. We're kind of in the middle. We do not have a special service on Christmas day, but we do have a Christmas jubilate celebration and we do typically have one or two worship services on the Sunday closest to Christmas that focus on the celebration of the birth of Christ. This year because both of our ongoing sermon series ended last week, we will have 4 services focused on what are typically advent and Christmas themes.

Now the idea of waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises is an idea that characterizes the whole Bible from one end to the other. From the time of the first promise that God made to Adam and Eve after the fall – a promise essentially that he was going to deliver a people and his own creation from the curse of sin – from the time of that first promise, the people of God have been waiting for its fulfillment. From time to time there are partial fulfillments, but there is always more to come as long

as sin remains in our lives and in the world. From the time of the first promise until the birth of Christ the waiting was for the coming of the promised deliverer. And from the ascension of Christ onward the people of God have been waiting for his return to bring to the promises of God to their ultimate and final fulfillment with the renewal of all things.

The passage that we are going to look at this morning is about God beginning to act to fulfill the heart of all the ancient promises, the birth of the Saviour. It tells the story of an announcement from an angel from heaven to an old priest named Zechariah that he and his wife were going to have a son, even though they had never had children, and even though they were long past the natural age of having children.

It is significant that God had been silent for some 400 years – that is God had not spoken to his people by prophecy or by angelic visitation for 400 years. Throughout the OT story, God had spoken to his people many times. Hebrews 1:1 says “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.” Many of the words that God had spoken had been words of rebuke for sin and words calling the people to repentance. But many of those words had been words of promise, telling of a time when God was going to send a mighty deliverer who would deliver his people from all their enemies and bring about a new age of blessedness and salvation. But by the time of Zechariah, the priest of our text, it had been 400 years since God had last spoken a fresh word to his people.

So, with the appearance of this angel to Zechariah, something big and momentous was happening. Zechariah was serving in the temple. There were a lot of priests and only one temple and so there was a rotation between the different divisions of priests. And we are told that Zechariah “was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense” (verse 9). And while Zechariah was in the temple performing his duty an angel of the Lord appeared to him.

Luke tells us this, expecting us to believe that what he is describing actually happened. One of the essential elements of biblical Christianity is belief in the supernatural. Many today do not believe in the supernatural, but there is no rational reason to reject the biblical claim of a supernatural realm. The biblical claim is that there is more to existence

than the material world, that there is a spiritual realm that is beyond what can be seen and measured. The Bible speaks unapologetically about God and miracles and angels and demons. And so we have it here.

Zechariah was afraid when he saw the angel of the Lord. That is not surprising. People are always afraid when they see angels in the Bible. Even in Bible-times this was not something that happened every day and it was frightening to get a visit from a heavenly being. But the angel told Zechariah not to be afraid. And then he brings this very significant message. First, he says, “for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you shall call his name John” (verse 13).

Now some people think that the prayer that the angel was referring to was Zechariah’s prayer for a son, but that is not likely. Zechariah was serving in the temple in an official capacity. It was probably a once-in-a-life-time event that he was offering incense in the temple. He would have been praying for Israel. He would have been praying for God’s blessing upon his people. He would have been praying the central prayer of Jewish piety that God would fulfill the promises that he had made to his people from Adam and Eve onward. He would have been praying for the victory of God over all his enemies and the coming of the kingdom of God.

And as it turns out, the answer to the prayer was not simply that Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a son, but that by means of this son God was going “to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (verse 17). This son was going to be part of the fulfillment of God’s promises. This son would be the beginning of the answer to the prayers that the people of God had been praying for centuries. The significance of this son was not just that an old couple who could not have children would finally have a child. It was that God was beginning to fulfill the promises that had been the hope of the godly for centuries.

Let’s look at what the angel says: Verse 14, “And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth...” Joy and gladness is an important theme in the gospel according to Luke and it has to do with the good news of God’s work of delivering his people and the world

from the curse of sin. Here is a small sample of texts. Luke 2:10, the angels announce the birth of Jesus, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” Luke 10:17 which speaks of the disciples coming back from a preaching mission, “The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord even the demons are subject to us in your name.’” After Jesus rose into heaven we are told in Luke 24:52, “And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” And Acts 13:52 which was also written by Luke, “And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”

This is the kind of joy that the angel is talking about. It is not simply that Zechariah and Elizabeth were going to have a son in their old age. The angel is referring to the joy that will accompany the fulfillment of the promises of salvation that God had been making from the time of Adam and Eve onward.

The underlying truth here is that sin is the cause of all misery and salvation from sin is the cause of the greatest possible joy. The underlying truth here is that separation from God is the cause of all misery and reconciliation with God is the cause of the greatest possible joy. This is what Advent and Christmas are all about for the people of God who are waiting for the coming of the Lord – both those who were waiting for the first coming and those who are now waiting for the second coming. The mission of Jesus was to rid the world of sin. That meant living a sinless life and dying the death, which paid for the penalty of sin. It also meant establishing the kingdom of God on the earth. The mission of Jesus was to conquer the whole kingdom of evil, by either saving people from it or eventually banishing those who refuse him to hell.

So, the angel was bringing a message that God was about to act to fulfill his ancient promises. The birth of this baby would be an important part of that. It is significant that God began to fulfill his promises by a birth that was, humanly speaking, impossible. Zechariah and Elizabeth were old. They were long past the natural age of child-bearing. And yet God moves to fulfill his promises of salvation through doing something that is impossible for humans. This reminds us of Abraham and Sarah at the beginning of the history of salvation. God promises to make a great

nation of Abraham and Sarah's offspring through whom he is going to bless the whole world, and Abraham and Sarah can't have children together.

This is how God delights to fulfill his purposes. He loves to move things along in ways that make it clear that it is his work and not just some kind of natural progression. And so it is here. John the Baptist is going to be a key player in God's plan to overcome sin and renew the world and he is born to a couple who could not have children when they were young and who were long past natural years of child-bearing. God is telling us through this that he is acting – he is at work in these events to bring about his plan of salvation for the world.

Well what else does the angel say about this son who was to be born of Zechariah and Elizabeth? He says that "he will be great before the Lord." This greatness had to do with the role he would play in salvation history. He was the one who would be the forerunner of Jesus Christ. His role would be to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He was not great in worldly terms. From a worldly perspective he was just another weirdo who announced that the sky was falling. He was an eccentric who lived an ascetic lifestyle in the wilderness and who met an early death because rebuked the king for living with his brother's wife. And yet, Jesus would later say, "I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John" (Luke 7:28).

John was great because he was the one who would tell the people to get ready for the coming of the Lord. He was great because he was the one whose purpose was to introduce the promised Saviour to the people of Israel. John the Baptist was great because his role was to announce the coming of the greatest person who ever lived – Jesus Christ - the one through whom God was going to fulfill all his promises concerning a glorious kingdom free from sin that would one day be the only kingdom. John's glory had nothing to do with himself and his accomplishments. It had everything to do with the role he would play as the one who prepared the way for Jesus Christ. John was great because he was chosen to be the servant who would introduce the Saviour to the world. John would later tell the people, "[H]e who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie" (Luke 3:16).

And you know, the greatness of John tells us what true greatness really is. Greatness has to do with telling others about Jesus. Greatness has to do with being witnesses to the worth and significance of Jesus Christ. Listen to the whole quote in which Jesus speaks about the greatness of John the Baptist. Luke 7:28, "I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." Jesus is speaking about his kingdom. He is speaking about those who follow him and who participate in the new life that he gives. New Testament Christians are greater than John, not because we are in anyway superior to him, but because of our participation in the age of the fulfillment of God's promises in Christ. And, like John, our greatness has to do with our task of pointing to Jesus as the Saviour and hope of the world. Our greatness has to do with the significance of our task and that task is to point to Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world by our lives and by our words. We are not great in ourselves. We are no better than anyone else. But as Christians we share in the greatness of Jesus because of our association with him and because of our task to point to him as the Lord and Saviour of the world.

Next the angel says of John, "And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb." Now the fact that he must not drink alcohol was a sign that he was set apart by the Lord for a holy task. In the Old Testament, certain people with special callings were to abstain from wine and strong drink. This was just part of setting him apart for his special task. And so is being filled with the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament those who were called to a special task in God's service received the Holy Spirit in a special way to equip them for that task.

It is interesting that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. It emphasizes God's choice of John, doesn't it? Clearly John was not chosen to play this significant role in God's plan of salvation because he somehow earned it. God chose him and equipped him before he was even born. This just reinforces the idea that what is going on here is God's doing. God uses people in the fulfillment of his purposes, but it is he who works through those people. This is emphasized again and again in the Bible. Back in Zechariah 4:6, God had said, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts." So, John was "filled

with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" to equip him for his task.

Now one of the outcomes of the coming of Jesus that John was going to announce was that all followers of Jesus would receive the Holy Spirit to enable them to serve the Lord. John would later say of Jesus, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

One of the things that Jesus would do after he had died, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven was to pour out the Holy Spirit upon his church. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us the life of Christ. The Holy Spirit is the one who changes our hearts so that we turn from sin to God. The Holy Spirit is the one who helps us to see sin for what it is and obedience to God for what it is. The Holy Spirit is the one who helps us to live the kind of life that we cannot live on our own. The giving of the Holy Spirit is an important part of the fulfillment of God's promises, and those promises have to do with living the life of blessedness which is the life of obedience to God.

The last part of the angel's announcement to Zechariah outlines the task that John the Baptist was to perform. Verses 16-17, "16And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

The task of John the Baptist was "make ready for the Lord a people prepared." The Lord was going to come and the people needed to be prepared for that. The way that they needed to be prepared was by turning away from their sins. He would "turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God." That implies that many of the children of Israel had turned away from the Lord their God and needed to turn back. John's task was to call them back. "He will go before him in the spirit and the power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children..." Elijah was a prophet who called the people of Israel in his day to return to the Lord. John the Baptist's message would be the same as Elijah's had been. The phrase about turning the hearts of the fathers to the children seems to speak of the breakdown of the family. Part of living a life that is pleasing to God is for fathers to be good fathers to their children. If that

does not happen, the whole people of God eventually turns from the Lord. This phrase highlights the importance of godly fathers for the people of God as a whole.

Then the angel says that John would turn “the disobedient to the wisdom of the just.” Again, John’s task was to call the people away from their sins to the “wisdom of the just.” And the heart of wisdom according to Proverbs is the fear of the Lord. John was to call the people to the fear of the Lord. This fear is not terror, but reverence and respect and loving obedience. And all of this was to “make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

Now this is the meaning of advent. John’s ministry is one of the sources of the idea of advent. The Lord is coming. And we need to be ready. The way to be ready is to turn from our sins. A people who are prepared for the coming of the Lord are a people who repenting of their sins and seeking to live lives that are pleasing to God.

The underlying idea here is that when God comes he comes in both judgement and salvation. The promises of God are good news, but they are only good news for those who are waiting for the Lord while repenting of their sins. For those who are living in sin – just living life without reference to God – the coming of the Lord is not good news for the Lord comes in judgment, as well as salvation. The salvation would be for those who were looking to God for deliverance from their sins. But part of the whole idea of God coming to save his people from sin is that he is also coming to defeat their enemies and his enemies – that is those who refuse to repent of their sins.

This is why John’s ministry was a call to repentance. Listen to the summary of his message as it is recorded in Luke 3:7-8, “⁷He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.” And when Jesus did come and begin to preach his message was the same. Jesus preached the good-news of the gospel, but part of that message was that if people refuse to follow him and serve him, they will receive the judgment of God. In Luke 6:25 Jesus said, “Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.”

You see the coming of the Lord to fulfill the promises of God is all about dealing with the problem of sin. Sin is the cause of all that is wrong in the world and in our lives. True blessedness consists of being freed from the guilt and power of sin so that we can live lives of blessing to the glory of God. This is what the plan of God is about. This is what the promises of God is about. This is the good news of what God is up to in his plan of salvation. But we must always remember that God's mission to rid the world of sin as two main parts to it. Some people are saved from their sins and thus reconciled to God. But those who refuse to submit to God and accept his salvation will endure the wrath of God forever.

So, when we think about the idea of advent – the biblical idea of being ready for the coming of the Lord – the way to be ready for the coming of the Lord is to be repenting of our sins. The way to be ready for the coming of the Lord is to be longing for the Lord to complete the work of doing away with sin in our own lives and in the world around us. The way to be ready for the coming of the Lord is to be on his side in the battle against sin. This is what the coming of Jesus is all about. The first time he came he came to “save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). That is good news for people who see sin as a problem. Not so much for those who have no desire to be saved from their sins. The next time Jesus comes – the second coming – Jesus will finish his work of saving his people from their sins, but that will include ridding the earth of those who refuse to be saved from their sins.

This is why Jesus and the apostles echoed this theme of the ministry of John the Baptist. Jesus' message was summarized in Mark by these words: “The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” And Paul in Romans 13:11-14 is speaking about being ready for the second coming of Christ and he says in verse 12, “The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

So, you see there is a serious side to advent and the birth of Jesus. It is good news of great joy. But we must understand that the good news is that God in Christ is going to deal with the curse of sin. It is only good news for us if we are willing to get on board with what Christ came on earth to do and that will be reflected in our own lives by trusting in Jesus

for forgiveness, but also embracing the mission to rid our lives of sin and instead living them for Jesus and for other people.

If we are living the life of fighting against sin in our lives, the coming of Jesus is good news of great joy. If we are not fighting against sin in our lives, the good news is that Jesus is willing to save us if we will turn from our sins and embrace salvation from sin. If we are not fighting against sin in our lives, and unwilling to change – hear the message of John the Baptist announcing the coming of Christ. “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:17).

The coming of Jesus is the best possible news. But only for those who embrace what he came to do – to save us from our sins.