

1st Sunday of Advent: Hope

Sermon series can be found at asburybham.org/sermons

Scripture Reading

Luke 1:5-25 (NRSV)

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, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

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. 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. 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, 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.' 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.' 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. 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.

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 favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

Summary

The Gospel according to Luke begins in the dark. For about 400 years before our passage, God seemed to be silent. We have no record of prophets being called. No visions were recorded. Nothing.

For 400 years, God's people were bullied, taxed, and ruled over by various regional powers like the Greeks and then the Romans. We can imagine that God's people cried out for help during most of that time and yet God still seemed to be silent.

In the this silence, Luke tells his readers about two righteous people living in Israel -a priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, who was a descendant of Aaron (Moses' brother).

The season of Advent begins in the same way. The days are getting darker and colder. Leaves are falling off of the trees. Advent begins in the dark — where we are awaiting a glimmer of hope and light. Not only in our world, but also in our lives.

Advent is a season of preparation - of getting ready. We get our homes ready by decorating them - trimming the tree and adding lights that shine in the dark hours of the night.

We are invited by the Gospel story, as it begins, to prepare our hearts and lives as well. For the child to be born to Elizabeth and Zechariah is the one chosen to prepare the people and the world to meet its Savior, Jesus - the son of Mary and Joseph.

It's time for us to share with one another what it means to prepare our hearts and our lives to welcome the birth of Christ again this year. What dark areas of our lives and our world need the light of Christmas the most? Are there any areas of our lives that are out of harmony with the way of Jesus? How can we all make the necessary changes to be in tune with the child born for us at Christmas?

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of your favorite practices and activities at the start of the season of Advent? How do you prepare your home and your heart for Christmas?
2. How do you think that the people of God felt as they wrestled with the perception of God's silence for 400 years? Could it have been that the people of God were not listening well? Or could it have been that the silence was building up to the grand gift of God's own self to be born among us?
3. Read the stories of Zechariah and Elizabeth closely. Where is the darkness in their lives? How do they demonstrate resilience in the midst of that darkness? And how does the message from Gabriel make a difference in their lives?
4. Are there any areas of our lives that are out of harmony with the way of Jesus? How can we all make the necessary changes to be in tune with the child born for us at Christmas?

Prayer by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153 AD)

Let your goodness Lord, appear to us, that we, made in your image, may conform ourselves to it. In our own strength we cannot imagine your majesty, power, and wonder, nor is it fitting for us to even try. But your mercy reaches from the heavens, through the clouds, to the earth below. You have come to us as a small child, but you have brought us the greatest gift, the gift of your eternal love. Caress us with your tiny hands, embrace us with your tiny arms, and pierce our hearts with your soft, sweet cries. Amen.

Practice

- The Season of Advent can come and go before we know it. This season, practice setting aside a few minutes with God each day. No agenda is necessary. Set a 5-minute timer and talk to God about the coming of the Christ Child, or use this time to discuss the prayers in your heart, or simply sit with God in the quiet.
- Be intentional about pausing during Lent. Listen to the 5-minute Asbury Daily Devotionals/Meditations each day during Advent. They can be found here: asburybham.org/podcast/