

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Advent Midweek 2
Wednesday, December 9th, 2020

Sermon: Prepare Ye: Ponder¹

Texts: Luke 1:5-25

Focus: Zechariah prepared for God's kingdom by his sacrifice of prayer.

Function: That they would hasten the coming of Christ by praying for his return.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "...I should be certain that these petitions are pleasing to our Father in heaven and are heard by Him; for He Himself has commanded us to pray in this way and has promised to hear us. Amen, amen means 'yes, yes, it shall be so'" (SC, Conclusion of the Lord's Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. Zechariah the priest was ministering at the altar of incense when the angel Gabriel showed up to give him Good News. In the Bible, incense is frequently associated with prayer. In Psalm 141 (and tonight's liturgy), we read, "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!" (Ps. 141:2, ESV).² In Revelation 8, we behold an angel at the altar in heaven's throne room: "And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel" (Rev. 8:3). John even tells us that the incense rising up before God in heaven *is* "the prayers of the saints" (Rev. 5:8). Prayers and incense go together, which is why the congregation gathered outside the temple were praying. No doubt, Zechariah prayed as well.

¹ The sermon *theme* comes from a series by R. Reed Lessing titled "Prepare Ye," but the sermon is my own.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

But what did he pray about? Perhaps Zechariah and the congregation prayed for freedom, as the country of the Jews was occupied by foreign legions of the Roman Empire. Maybe they prayed for Messiah to come, as did Simeon, who was “waiting for the consolation of Israel” (2:25). More likely than not, Zechariah also prayed for himself and his wife Elizabeth, that the Lord would open her womb and grant them a child.

More than anything, Zechariah and Elizabeth longed for a child. Children were seen as a blessing and reward from God (Ps. 127:3). And in addition to the joy of hearing children’s voices in the home and enlarging our love, Jewish children were a sign that God kept his promise to make a great nation out of Father Abraham—and to send Messiah from his family line. So to *not* have children was a terrible disgrace in that culture. Indeed, Elizabeth’s infertility caused her great embarrassment and shame in her community (cf. 1:25). But now Zechariah and Elizabeth were too old to get pregnant. So maybe Zechariah didn’t pray anymore for a baby. Maybe he had given up on getting a miracle from God.

Some of you can relate to the great sadness and emptiness of Zechariah and Elizabeth. More than anything, you want a baby, and you have prayed and waited for so long. Perhaps you cannot get pregnant, or you have lost babies to miscarriage, or your adoption did not go through. Whatever the tragedy of your circumstances might be, God has not permitted you to have children—at least not yet. So you have settled on “fur babies” and call your cats and dogs your “babies.” Or you dole out extra attention on your nieces and nephews, who serve as surrogate children. But in your aching heart, you know that these are not a suitable substitute for children of your own. You smile and put on a good face, but at the end of the day, it’s not what you want.

Luke tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth “had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years” (Luke 1:7). Yet even though that statement sounds like a dead

end to all hopes of having a family, any reader of the Old Testament knows that the mention of infertility is a clue foreshadowing that God is about to do something big. Infertility seemed to be a perennial issue with each generation of the patriarchs. Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel were all barren until God promised them sons and opened their wombs (Gen. 11:30; 25:21; 29:31). But each time, God heard their desperate prayers and intervened, granting them one or more sons.

And God was about to do the same for Zechariah and Elizabeth. “Do not be afraid, Zechariah,” said the angel Gabriel, “for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John” (Luke 1:13).

“Your prayer has been heard.” Such wonderful words! Which of us wouldn’t love for God to send an angel to give us that same confirmation after our prayers—no matter for what we pray? “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard...”

The Bible tells us that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (Jas. 5:16). Zechariah was a righteous man (1:6), and Elizabeth was a righteous woman (1:7). They were people who believed and trusted God’s Word. They were righteous by faith in God’s promises (cf. Gen. 15:6). And so their prayers powerful. They worked! They prayed, and God listened.

But this time Zechariah did not believe what God said. It was too good to be true! “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years” (v. 18).

But Gabriel, whose name in Hebrew means “God’s warrior” or “God’s hero,” was not one to be brushed off so easily. “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news” (v. 19). So if you don’t believe it, then I’ll prove it to you! Gabriel assured Zechariah that God keeps his promises, and it would be done just as he spoke (v. 20). Zechariah was dumbfounded—literally! The angel told him he would

not be able to speak until little Johnny would be born. That way, he would know God's Word is true. For nothing is impossible with God (cf. 1:37).

Soon enough, Elizabeth conceived a child. Her baby would be born a few months before Jesus and grow up to be John the Baptist, who would "go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah..., to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (1:17). John the Baptist was the voice crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" (Mark 1:3). The prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth *worked*.

So what about you and I? Do our prayers work? And if they do, then for what ought we to pray?

Again, "the prayer of a righteous man has great power as it is working" (Jas. 5:16). We are righteous people, because we are a people made righteous by the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross for our forgiveness. We are justified by faith in his Word—his good promises to you and me. For that is what justification means—to be *made* righteous by God. So as righteous people, we pray powerful prayers. That is why the Apostle Paul urges us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17) and to "pray for all people," as he does in our epistle lesson (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

But during this season of Advent, this time of preparing not just for Christmas, but even more so for the return of the King, there is one particular prayer that we ought to pray:

Maranatha! This Aramaic word means "Come, Lord!" and appears in 1 Corinthians 16:22.

Maranatha—come, Lord! Come back! Return to us! End our waiting and bring our hope to sight. For what we long for even more than children of our own is for God's Child: Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Once he came at Christmas all those years ago. But now the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord promises to come again. And so we pray.

In last Sunday's epistle, St. Peter reminded us that our time on earth is a never-ending Advent—a season of waiting for Christ's coming again. And in the midst of our disappointments and distress, we can become distracted or lose hope or stop expecting him to come. But the Lord is not slow to fulfill his promises (2 Pet. 3:9). He always keeps his Word.

So if Jesus says he is coming back, then he will return. Truly, Jesus says no one knows the day or hour. And yet the apostle hints at the surprising fact that *we*—the people of God—can actually *hasten* his return (2 Pet. 3:12). We can help Jesus hurry up! We can move forward the hands of the clock.

So how do we do that? By praying the prayer of Advent: Come, Lord Jesus. It is the last prayer in the entire Bible, spoken in response to Jesus' promise: "'Surely, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20). Come, Lord Jesus! Come, precious Son of God and son of Mary! Forgive our sins, return to us, and set the world to rights. We have been waiting for you for a very long time. Make us ready, Lord. And *maranatha*—come, Lord Jesus! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.