

## **GOD'S MYSTERIOUS WAYS**

**Malachi 3:1-7, Luke 1:68-79**

**Preached by Dr. Cahill**

**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

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The Advent Season invites everyone to become increasingly aware of God working out his purposes as his mysterious and mystical ways converge at the right time and place to bring salvation to the world.

The first chapter of Luke's Gospel introduces the key players in this mystery drama. Mary, the mother of Jesus, along with Joseph, her husband, are certainly the best known. Not so well known, are Mary's older cousin, Elizabeth, and her husband, Zechariah, who late in life became the parents of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist.

Some say this story is fantasy fiction. They won't deny Mary and Joseph were Jesus' parents and Zechariah and Elizabeth were Jesus' aunt and uncle, but they'd argue Luke played fast and loose with the facts making the stories surrounding Jesus' birth beyond belief, except for children and the simple minded. But that's OK. Jesus himself said before we can enter the Kingdom of God we must first become like little children, not gullible, but trusting, growing into that mountain moving faith because with God all things are possible even angelic visitations and a virgin birth. So embrace your inner child. Listen attentively to the story of God, suspending the laws of nature, in order to make love possible.

Our scripture is Zechariah's prophecy spoken at his newborn son's circumcision and naming ceremony. But first, a quick review of what came first.

Luke's narrative begins by introducing Zechariah, a priest serving in the Jerusalem Temple. He and his wife were elderly and childless, even so, both were favored by God. I add "favored by God" because being unable to bear children back then was seen as a sign of God's displeasure.

We read in Luke it was Zechariah's turn to enter the temple's inner sanctum called the Holy of Holies, the most sacred space, where it was believed God chose as his dwelling place on earth. Separated by a heavy curtain, the same curtain torn in two at the precise moment of Jesus' death on the cross, only a priest, chosen by lot was allowed to enter through the curtain on high holy days, but always with a rope tied around his waist just in case he was struck unconscious, or worse dead, by standing in God's awesome presence.

While performing his priestly duties, an angel appeared to announce his wife would bear a son they would name John who'd grow up to become a mighty prophet with the spirit and power of Elijah, to bring people to repentance and then prepare them for the Messiah's coming.

Incredulous, Zechariah asked how this was possible since Elizabeth was way beyond child bearing years. After identifying himself to be Gabriel the angel then told Zechariah he'd be immediately rendered dumb, unable to speak a word, until the time was right.

Sure enough, coming out from behind the curtain, Zechariah, unable to speak, could only wave his hands around in frustration. Then, having performed his temple duties he then went home and, as promised, Elizabeth soon conceived.

Fast forward to soon after John's birth. Friends and relatives celebrated with Elizabeth and Zechariah, expecting the child would be named after his father. But Elizabeth said "no," his name was John. Thinking maybe Elizabeth was taking advantage of her husband's inability to speak for himself they looked to Zechariah who quickly wrote on a tablet, "His name is John."

Immediately his silence was broken and filled with the Spirit began to speak, praising God saying,

*Blessed be the Lord God  
of Israel...  
He has raised up a mighty  
savior for us...  
as he spoke through...  
his holy prophets of old  
Thus he has shown the mercy  
promised...our ancestors  
and has remembered his  
holy covenant...  
to grant...that we, being  
rescued from the  
hands of our enemies  
might serve him without fear  
in holiness  
and righteousness.*

Then after announcing the imminent arrival of the Messiah, Zechariah turned his attention to his new born son and the important role he'd play.

*And you child, will be called the  
prophet of the Most High,  
for you will go before the Lord  
to prepare his way  
to give knowledge of salvation...  
by the forgiveness of sins...  
to give light to those  
who sit in darkness...  
to guide our feet on the  
way to peace.*

During his nine months of imposed silence, I see Zechariah being led to search the scriptures, particularly the prophets who foretold the Messiah's coming and especially Malachi, the last of the prophets, who several hundred years earlier promised,

*See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me...But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears?*

*For he is like a refiner's fire...he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord...*

*Then I will draw near to you for judgment... (Malachi 3:1-5)*

Using the metaphor of the refiner's fire that purifies silver and gold, Zechariah predicted John would expect the people of Israel to listen hard both to his words and the prophets' before him who preached the same message of repentance and keeping the covenant by sharing their coats and food with anybody who had none. Tax collectors were told to be honest and soldiers not to abuse their authority. In short, the Baptist's demands were no different than the prophets before him: be just, be compassionate, be humble, walk with God. (Micah 5:8)

Keep in mind Zechariah's prophecy was made in the company of relatives and neighbors, the majority of them having strong connections to the Temple. The priesthood was a hereditary family business and these families zealously guarded their status.

I mention this because the priestly families were the aristocracy, the scholars and spiritual leaders of the nation, or so they claimed. Unfortunately, too often both the historical and prophetic books of the Old Testament exposed the Temple Priests being corrupted by power. In fact, they were one of the reasons why God raised up prophets, who usually didn't have the pedigree necessary to be a priest, but had the authority of God himself to speak truth to power and challenge the priests to renounce their self-serving ways and embrace God's calling to work for justice and peace in the land.

So, when Zechariah predicted John would be a prophet calling the people to repent, his and Elizabeth's relatives and friends had to be thinking, "Oh no, after hundreds of years of blissful silence, along comes another zealous rabble rouser, blaming us for all the world's troubles, challenging our authority, undermining our way of life and upsetting our Roman masters with all this talk of a new King coming to rule the world."

Sure enough, thirty years later when John was preaching repentance and the coming of a new age led by God's Messiah it was the entrenched religious establishment, John's own relatives, who feared and resented his call to turn from the old and be embraced by the new. Whether they liked it or not after centuries of silence God was finally on the move, speaking loud and clear that the old was finished and the new has come.

Question: what does all of this ancient biblical stuff have to do with me and my generation of believers?

Answer: Everything. How you and I observe Advent will determine how you and I celebrate Christmas. We have two alternatives:

- 1) Celebrate Christmas as a day to bake cookies, give and receive presents, enjoy families and friends and sing along with Bing Crosby "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas"

or

- 2) Celebrate Christmas as the day the Word became flesh, Jesus, the Son of God was born to preach the Gospel and die for the sins of the world only to be raised up on the third day, conquering once and for all the powers of sin and death over humankind.

If you choose option 2, good for you, but there're consequences and radical requirements. Here they are and not necessarily in order of importance.

- 1) Stop living to indulge and amuse yourself. You'll never be happy if you don't.
- 2) Start living for others. Put your wants and needs behind others' wants and needs, certainly your family members' and friends', but especially the stranger (who just might be Christ himself).
- 3) Make seeking Christ and his Kingdom your highest priority. Talk and listen to God. Read the scriptures so God can speak to you through the Bible. Praise God. Confess your sins and share your frustrations, pray for the wisdom and strength to live according to God's will. Thank God for your blessings. Pray for others.
- 4) Claim your truest identity: you are a child of God. God is your Father, Christ is your Brother. The Spirit is your friend and helper.
- 5) Last but not least, ask Jesus to save you from yourself. Surrender, give up anything keeping you from giving yourself totally to God.

Advent invites us to go on both that inward journey to find Christ and the outward journey to serve our neighbor. Do these things and like Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, Elizabeth and their son the Baptist, you'll be ready when Christ comes near to embrace and love you into his Kingdom.