

## CHRISTMAS PREPARATIONS

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent

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Luke 1:5-25; 64-80 and 3:1-6

#### INTRODUCTION

Humorist, Dave Berry, writes,

“Your standard man, at this point in the Christmas season, has purchased zero gifts. He has not yet gotten around to purchasing an acceptable gift for his wife for last Christmas. He did give her something last year, but he could tell by her reaction to it that she had not been dreaming of getting an auto emergency kit, even though it was the deluxe model with booster cables and an air compressor. Clearly this gift violated an important rule, but the man had no idea what this rule was, and his wife was too upset to tell him.”

I don't know how many “standard men” we have here this morning. But one of the consistent messages we get everywhere this Christmas season is that we need to get ready. And, a few days before Christmas, one of the standard questions often asked in our chance encounters is, “Are you ready for Christmas?” What is meant, of course, are the details like our Christmas shopping done, cards sent, decorating finished, and baking done for our entertaining. But I want us to reflect what it *really* means to be ready for Christmas— how we prepare our hearts for a fresh, life-shaping observance of the birth of our Lord.

Preparation is important for anything we do. And, to a large degree, the quality of the experience hinges upon how well we are prepared. Attending a class well prepared, having read and studied the material works far better than coming clueless. Hopefully, we prepare well for bad weather— though at the first slick roads there is always an incredible line-up at the tire stores getting studded snow tires on. Don't we know it's going to snow? We prepare for retirement through saving and developing other interests.

I've shared with you before, a recurrent nightmare I have which is that, I realize it is Sunday morning and I forgot to prepare a sermon. I awaken with a sense of terror gripping my heart. The panic of being caught unprepared. Whether being caught unprepared constitutes one of your standard nightmares or not, we all know that panicky feeling: the pop quiz in school; the surprise company dropping in at meal time; the important event you'd spaced out.

Luke realizes the importance of preparation. By beginning his Gospel with the miraculous birth to Zechariah and Elizabeth it is calling our attention to this wonderful truth we often rush past to get to the Christmas story— the need for preparation. In the narrative about the birth of John to Zechariah and Elizabeth, we see God's careful detailed preparation and timing for the birth of Jesus.

I love Luke's Gospel in the way he intertwines the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. There are

two facets of preparation to look at here:

1. We can stand in awe at God's carefully detailed preparation for Jesus' birth which leads our hearts to trust Him anew.
2. Also, we understand our role in how we can be prepared for experiencing new life in Christ.

### **GOD'S PREPARATIONS**

In Zechariah and Elizabeth, we get a glimpse of the detail with which God is preparing everything for the birth of His Son. John the Baptist is crucial in setting the scene for the launch of Jesus' ministry. As his father, Zechariah prophesies,

*And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,  
to give his people the knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins, (Luke 1:76-77)*

John the Baptist calls people to repentance in preparation for the new life Jesus brings, to *make ready a people prepared for the Lord* (1:17), to use Gabriel's words. John's birth is supernatural and he is filled with the Holy Spirit from birth (1:16).

There is also another wonderful provision in Elizabeth's pregnancy— encouragement and confirmation for Mary. Remember that when Gabriel visits Mary, he informs her of Elizabeth's supernatural pregnancy as a sign confirming his word to her saying,

*Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." (Luke 1:36-37)*

Mary quickly makes the 70 mi. journey to visit Elizabeth, a relative. As Mary greets Elizabeth, another supernatural sign is given as the 6 mo.-along fetus within Elizabeth gave a leap and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied. Here, we see God has prepared a means of support for Mary as she deals with her role. She stays with Elizabeth for three months, until John is born.

Then, there was the census by Rome that forced Mary and Joseph to make the long 80 mi. journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem— just in time to fulfill the prophecy of the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem. Also, at "just the right time" there is a major celestial event that happens once every 3,000 years— the coming together of Jupiter, Venus, and the star Regulus to form a bright light in the sky. It is likely this event started the Magi on their journey to worship Jesus. Even the movements of the planets and stars are coordinated to prepare the way. The evil rage of Herod that makes Joseph, Mary and Jesus refugees in Egypt for a time serves ultimately to fulfill prophecy. After Herod's death, the succession of the throne to his son causes the Holy family to return to Nazareth rather than Bethlehem— again, fulfilling prophecy. And, beyond the Scriptural account, Alexander the Great had conquered the region and given them a common language. Rome built a superb system of roads over which the disciples would spread the faith. In all this, and much more, we see the truth Paul calls our attention to in Gal. 4:4— *But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son....* Intricate preparation that only God could bring off.

I came across this story concerning the amazing way God engineers circumstances for His purposes. Shortly after WW II ended in 1945, a young associate pastor named Cliff and his fiancée were anxious to get married. They had very little money, but managed to scrape together

enough for a simple wedding and two train tickets to a city where a friend had invited Cliff to come to hold some revival services. They planned to combine their honeymoon with the revival services so they could afford their honeymoon. For the honeymoon part, they planned to stay in a nearby resort hotel. However, when they arrived at the hotel, they learned it had been taken over by the military for use as a rehabilitation center, no longer open to guests. So, here they were stranded in an unfamiliar city with very little money, not knowing where to go. They carried their luggage back to the highway to hitch a ride. Soon a car pulled over and asked them where they wanted to go. They said, "We don't know." They explained their situation and said they were open to suggestions. The man said there was a grocery store owned by a woman he knew a few miles down the road with a couple of empty rooms upstairs. She might be willing to rent them to them.

They rented the room for five dollars. There was a piano there and the first day there, Cliff's wife sat down and began playing. Cliff had brought his trombone along for the revival meetings and began playing as well. The store owner, sitting in a rocking chair out front realized now they were Christians. She referred them to a friend of hers who had considerably nicer accommodations, and he invited them to spend the rest of their honeymoon in his home. After several days, their host mentioned that a young evangelist was speaking at a youth rally at a nearby conference center. They invited Cliff and his bride to attend with them.

That night, at the evangelistic meeting, it so happened the regular song leader was sick. Cliff's host, knowing of Cliff's musical background, offered Cliff to take charge of the music. What an historic occasion that turned out to be! The evangelist was a very young Billy Graham. Cliff's last name was Barrows. That night was the first time they met. From that, a lifetime partnership was formed with Billy Graham teaming up with Cliff Barrows to lead the music for the rest of Billy Graham's ministry.

### **PREPARED PEOPLE**

Charlie Brown, in one of the "Peanuts" cartoon strips says,

"Life is too much for me. I've been confused from the day I was born. I think the whole trouble is that we're thrown into life too fast. We're not really prepared."

Can you identify with that? Well, Linus' response is not particularly helpful as he says,

"What do you want... a chance to warm up first?"

Well, maybe Advent can be seen as a chance to warm up to Christmas. Here in Luke, we pick up a second theme of individuals being prepared to receive God's gift. As the carol "Joy to the World" says, "Let every heart, prepare Him room." We need preparation. Jesus comes to people who are open, ready, and prepared. I want to lift up three ingredients I see here in preparation.

**First**, there is **faithfulness and right living**. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth, we are told, *were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly*. (Luke 1:6). That day was probably like most any other in the life of a priest. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of priests for the temple. So many, they were organized into 24 divisions. It

was the duty of the priests to keep the incense burning before the altar in front of the Most Holy Place. One priest would be selected by lot to enter this holy room where no one else could enter, to supply fresh incense on the altar before the morning sacrifice and before the evening sacrifice. It was an honor to be chosen and there were so many priests that some never got chosen in their lifetime. This morning, the lot fell to Zechariah. It is as he is performing this sacred duty, he is encountered by the angel, Gabriel, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. From the lips of Gabriel, he is given an incredible promise of a son who he is to name John. Glorious detail is given regarding John's role in preparing people for the coming of Jesus— words about joy and power and being filled with the Holy Spirit. What if Zechariah had decided to skip work that day? After all, there were more priests than needed. But he was there. He just showed up. Or consider the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks that night. Maybe one of them had decided to take the night off. Think of the consequences. Remember, a lot of life is just showing up.

You showed up today. You could have slept in, done Christmas shopping, etc., but you chose to come and worship God as your first priority. Never underestimate the value of faithfulness, just being there. We had the funeral service for Alice Brown Friday. To me, her life modeled faithfulness. She was always here Sunday morning. What a blessing her quiet presence always was to us all— just seeing her in her pew warmed my heart.

It is hard for us to imagine the tragedy that not being able to have children was in that day. Zechariah could have divorced Elizabeth for not bearing children— it was considered the woman's fault. But he didn't divorce her, for both of them were righteous, Luke tells us. They shared this deep disappointment, this pain. Women especially felt the rejection of society; it was often considered a sign of divine disfavor. And, since they were both well along in years, they were to the point where their only possible hope was a miracle. We know, though, that they have been praying for years for a child since the angel affirms it is their prayers that have been heard— those prayers have made possible this miraculous birth.

**Second**, there is lots of **quiet**, reflective times in the narrative. It sometimes seems to me that Zechariah's question, *How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years* (1:18), seems like a rather minor expression of unbelief to receive such a harsh sentence of angel-imposed silence. Zechariah's question sounds innocent enough to us— asking for some verification, something to help him believe the impossible. After all, disappointment had dogged their prayers for maybe 30, 40, or even 50 years. The sign he gets is not one he bargained for. For speaking the wrong words at the wrong time, expressing doubt, he is sentenced to silence until the birth of John. Zechariah comes out from the angel visitation unable to even finish his job. The people were waiting outside for a blessing. All he could do was try to communicate with his hands and motions.

Some of us men aren't known for our verbal skills. And I can expect some of you wives might be thinking, "How would I know if my husband were struck dumb? He never talks anyway!" But then, I wonder if silence was *really* a harsh sentence. There is quietness here, wonder,

reflection. Barbara Brown Taylor, in one of her sermons, suggests that the imposed silence was perhaps also a gift in disguise— “a gestation period of his own during which the seeds of hope were sown again in his hushed soul.” We live in an age where we are bombarded with words and explanations of what really can’t be explained. Words are used to manipulate us, to promise things which cannot be delivered. Our world is filled with the noise of everyone and everything trying to get our attention. I’ve been thinking of Zechariah’s nine months of silence— pondering things too wonderful to fully comprehend. When his tongue is finally loosed, “*he began to speak, praising God* (Lk. 1:65).” And he prophesies the continued intertwining of John’s life with the Messiah.

Elizabeth also models this in remaining in seclusion for five months. People can be too quick to jump on the Christian celebrity circuit with their miracles. Elizabeth teaches us the wisdom of solitude and letting the Spirit work deeply within us before going public.

Advent is a season for us to pull back from the noise and rush of the world enough to let our hearts become hushed and still. We need to follow the example of Mary who “treasured up all these things and **pondered** them in her heart (Lk. 2:19).” Ponder the wonder, the glory, the mystery of God coming to us in Christ. How about “dreaming of a quiet Christmas?” I like the quote in the bulletin by Augustine of Hippo:

*What you do not understand, treat with reverence and be patient,  
and what you do understand, cherish and keep.*

Isn’t that what we see in the silences of this story?

**Third**, there is **relinquishment**. It is most eloquently expressed in Mary’s response to the Gabriel’s visit, *Let it be to me according to your word* (1:38). Here is a complete surrender to God’s will and plan— a willingness to do whatever He may ask. But, while not as explicitly stated in the others in our story, it is nonetheless present in Zechariah and Elizabeth. Their lives are marked by a willingness to do what the Lord asks.

Everyone in the Christmas story is submitted to and obedient to something way beyond themselves. We’ve seen it in Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary and Joseph. But also it can be seen in the shepherds and later the Magi. Each one, in their own unique ways, saying, *Let it be to me according to your word*. That too is needed to prepare our hearts for Christmas.

## CONCLUSION

Are you ready for Christmas? Certainly there are many preparations to be made to fully enjoy this celebration. BUT, don’t forget to prepare your heart. Keep your priorities straight— be faithful in your spiritual practice. Take time away to ponder deeply the mystery of God coming to us in Jesus. Offer your heart afresh in relinquishment to God for His purposes.

The same God who brought everything together that first Christmas is continuing to work in our world and will bring it all to a glorious consummation in Christ Jesus. But, He is also at work in our lives accomplishing His purposes even as He did for Billy Graham and Cliff Barrows.