

A People Prepared for the Lord (Luke 1. 5-23)

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In the Christian calendar, Advent is observed as a season of waiting and longing, of anticipation and preparation, of thresholds and edges. Advent invites us to wake up to where we are and open to what's coming; to stand on the brink of ending and the cusp of newness; it's a liminal, uncertain, fearful, hopeful time. Every year, liturgically we come back into this liminal space. This year, it feels particularly congruent with the sense many of us have that we stand collectively on the brink, unsure of what's coming towards us. Things are ending, things are beginning. Will they be for good or ill?

Many are anxious about the impact of the incoming US administration on the future of our common life; climate breakdown is underway; tyrants, war-mongers and kleptocrats seem to have the upper hand in many parts of the globe and whole populations suffer unthinkable hardship and atrocity. In many cases, the time for protest seems past – it's already too late to avert certain outcomes. And in any case, the old systems for ordering affairs – economic, political, social, religious – seem to be wearing out. We cannot go back and we're struggling collectively to imagine a way forward. How then are we to live? How are we called to be and become?

In Advent, we tell stories of those who longed for God's life to break more fully into theirs. From them, we learn what it takes to be capable of bearing and welcoming that life in the face of injustice and repression. The gospel of Luke, in particular, focuses on the spiritual and relational hinterland of the emergence in history of God's grace and truth. Luke suggests that the birth of God at the human level, the shift God makes possible for human consciousness, does not happen out of nowhere. There's a necessary context and receptivity. So as we seek wisdom and the

emergence of new possibilities for being in our day, perhaps these stories can help light our way.

‘In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah’. Luke’s narrative begins by naming two characters who represent radically different ways of being, radically different levels of consciousness. Herod was a client king who owed his power to the favour of the Roman emperor. He seems to have spent his life energy consolidating his power and influence by accumulating wealth, making strategic marriage alliances and currying favour with the Romans. He’s given credit by historians for his colossal building projects, including the rebuilding of the Second Temple and the development of water supplies for Jerusalem, but he’s also accused of using secret police to monitor the populace, of suppressing dissent and levying heavy taxes to fund his projects. ‘Outbreaks of violence and riots followed his death in many cities, including Jerusalem, as pent-up resentments boiled over’.¹ King Herod, then, represents a life dedicated to worldly gain and private, dynastic advancement.

Zechariah, on the other hand, represents a life dedicated to a different reality altogether. Both he and his wife Elizabeth were descended from priestly lineages, where priesthood involved the solemn responsibility of mediating between God and God’s people. The priest’s calling was to maintain connection with the holy, to enter into God’s sanctuary on behalf of the people and come out again bearing blessing for all. Zechariah lives in the world over which Herod rules, but in the midst of this world he’s answerable to something more, connected to something vastly larger than that which preoccupies his king.

And one day, having been chosen by lot to enter alone into the sanctuary, he encountered that vastly larger ‘something’ face to face. It appeared to him in the form of an angel of the Lord, ‘standing at the right side of the altar of incense’. The impact was almost unbearable. Zechariah ‘was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him’. Unlike the priests of ancient Israel, we too readily forget the risk of prayer – so

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great

domesticated is our image of God. Annie Dillard wrote: 'On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions'. 'The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets', she writes, 'mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews'. Why? Because 'the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return'.² As the letter to the Hebrews puts it: 'it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb. 10.31).

And so it was for Zechariah. His lifelong dedication, his persistent faithfulness despite the disappointment of his personal hopes, has yielded at last to a live encounter with his God. And to difficult promise. Against all expectation, his yearning is to be met: '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'. The angel promises him 'joy and gladness' in this fulfilment, but presumably Zechariah knows enough of his own tradition to realise that those called to play a particular part in forwarding God's purposes don't usually have straightforward lives.

This longed for son's vocation will be to 'make ready a people prepared for the Lord', and I'm struck by what the people's readiness for God is said to consist of. It requires the emergence of a yearning for what we might call intergenerational justice. According to the angel Gabriel, John's task is to turn the hearts of parents to their children. It involves also conversion from unreality: John is to turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous. But by this point, it's all too much for Zechariah to believe ... impossible. And so, perhaps as blessing more than curse, he's relieved of the necessity to speak of what's befallen him. God has spoken and something has begun, some availability presumed ... and now God's purpose must be

² Annie Dillard, 'An Expedition to the Pole' in *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), pp.52-53.

given time to ripen and be realised. Perhaps then it's not surprising it was Zechariah who was chosen – he's been used to waiting on God.

I began by suggesting the stories of Advent may help light our way in these liminal, uncertain times – when we're unclear how best to respond to the fears and needs of our world. Some of the themes I've drawn from Zechariah's story are familiar in a contemplative context. There's necessity of being connected to a larger reality, remaining faithful in the face of disappointment and frustration, expanding the courage to be truly present and to wait on God as the next step clarifies, recognising that the unfolding of God's purposes may take time – indeed, may be generations in the making. But there's one further theme I'd like to draw out now. I've focused on the character of Zechariah – his dedication, his prayer, his receptivity. But a point we often neglect is that his and Elizabeth's part in this story is grounded in their participation in a worshipping community.

When Zechariah encounters the angel in the sanctuary, we're told that 'the whole assembly of the people was praying outside'. He was in the sanctuary for a long time and though they 'wondered at his delay', when he finally emerges the people are still there waiting for and with him. And though he cannot speak to them, though he can only communicate by way of gestures, they realise 'that he had seen a vision'. In other words, they are sufficiently attuned to the ways of God that they recognise God's impact when they see it in someone's life, and they honour it.

This Advent, we're asking about the context of incarnation. How does God come to be born among us, how may the life of God break in to a human culture that's so often preoccupied by penultimate things – obsession with money, power and control, ruled by those who are ruthlessly self-interested and heedless of the welfare of the whole? We know that birthing God requires that particular people – like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary and John – consent bear God's impact directly in their bodies and their lives. But the gospel also testifies that God's advent among us necessarily occurs within a larger context. It requires communities dedicated to clearing and holding the space of prayer, communities capable of discerning the signs

of the times and empowering those among them, communities formed by shared yearning for truth, justice and peace, willing to welcome God's life and respond to God's sometimes difficult promise and call.

I sense we are and are becoming this kind of community. So this Advent, I want to encourage us to keep listening together, to keep holding the space of prayer and paying attention to what is being asked of us, that we may play our part in preparing the way of the Lord.