

“The Prophetic Path”

Fourth Sermon in the Advent Series: *Proclamation & Promise: The Prophetic Voices of Advent*
Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

New Revised Standard Version

**This manuscript is an interpretation of the sermonic moment. Use it as a guide for the sermon direction; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

We're days away...hours,
really, from Christmas. Can
you feel the anticipation in the
air? It never gets old, does it?

Kids anticipate unwrapping
gifts. Teens anticipate more
time with their friends and
fiddling with new electronics
and gadgets. College kids
anticipate doing laundry at
home, or rather, having their
mom or dad do their laundry
for them at home. And we
adults anticipate all kinds of
things - family dinner together,
loved ones flying in, decorating
and card-writing, cooking and
Christmas light perusing.

I can tell you that we ministers
anticipate Christmas because it
feels like crossing the finish
line after a marathon we never
quite seem to be prepared for -
no matter how many times we
run it!

There are, of course, those
seasons of life when we don't
anticipate Christmas with

joy...times when the season is
tinged with grief and focus on
who is not around the table
rather than who is, times where
the stress of work or overtime
shifts, or strained relationships,
or the costs of travel prevent us
from being with family. Times
when we are so busy preparing
for Christmas that when it
finally comes it feels anti-
climactic and under-whelming.
And we vow that next year,
we'll make things simpler so
that we can really savor the
season.

Whatever your experience, the
wonder of this season to me is
that while the season always
has a heightened level of “busy-
ness” to it; it always has a
heightened level of “beauty” to
it as well. And while it always
has some “great expectations”
that go unmet; it also has some
“surprises” that we couldn't
plan for if we tried. And while
it can feel like the plans and
preparations are getting the best
of us at times, it's also true that

it is *in* the plans and the preparations that the Christmas spirit is born. It is a mystery that as we wait for Christmas, we are also simultaneously experiencing it.

This is, of course, the point of the season of Advent, the season of waiting and expecting. Advent is not a passive season of sitting back and relaxing - like we're in our LazyBoy recliners flipping through the channels just waiting until we land on Christmas morning. No, Advent is an active season of waiting - the kind of waiting that causes you to lean forward in your seat to hear somebody across a table at a loud restaurant or the kind of waiting that causes you to sit up a bit taller to try and make out something that you can't quite see in the distance.

Advent has a certain eager anticipation about it that Christmas Day is supposed to fulfill. But, sometimes, Christmas comes and goes and we're still left wanting. Do you ever feel that way? Like you've been preparing for this special guest of honor for your party and then Christmas morning

comes and and you feel like he's a "no show?" If you do, and I certainly have felt this way before, it makes me wonder - just *who* or *what* is this guest of honor that we're waiting for? Or preparing for?

At Christmas, we are taught to be watching for signs of a little baby in our midst - the wonder of the Christ child - but sometimes, I wonder, if maybe we ought also to be watching for something a bit less obvious and a bit more foundational - the well-worn path that leads to the manger, and beyond it as well.

We've seen over the last 2-3 months of studying the Old Testament that the matriarchs and the patriarch and the priests and the prophets have been laying a path for us. Or at least, making visible a path that God has laid out for them. The prophets are kind of like those nice little solar-powered walkway lights up to a front door - you know the ones that click on when it starts to turn dusk?...reminding the people that when life gets tough and darkness is all around the path is still there...God is still there...illuminating the way.

Sure, it's a path that culminates in the birth of a baby. But I'm not sure that for the prophets the baby was the end-all-be-all for them. I think they saw that path leading to not just a new little *life* in *one* person, but rather, to a whole new *way of living* for an *entire* people.

The prophetic path to Bethlehem had a tired Joseph leading an exhausted Mary on a donkey, and it also had a bright shining star leading and guiding complete strangers - the Wise Ones - to that same place. The prophetic path to Christmas was both a particular road of nitty-gritty human experience for one young family AND a universal path that would open up into world-wide revelation. The Light shining in the Darkness. The Word made Flesh. The Prince of Peace.

You see, the prophets have reminded us that at Christmas we are to anticipate the birth of a baby, and we are to anticipate the birth of a whole new world order and way of living. And if we just celebrate the baby, without celebrating the world he came to bring about, then...we're missing out, and

maybe even missing the point altogether.

So let's back up just a bit and look at the prophetic voices of Advent we've heard thus far. They have all brought a message related to some aspect of new life. The Prophet Jeremiah brought the message and promise of the Messiah (Jeremiah 33). The Prophet Isaiah brought the message of comfort to an exiled people saying a return home was coming soon (Isaiah 40); and the Priest Ezra brought the welcome news that the people could return home from exile and rebuild the temple and put God at the center of their lives again (Ezra 1, 3).

And now, as we turn the pages into the New Testament, we have another priest - Zechariah - who has a prophetic role for us to learn from, a proclamation that goes far beyond words.

Now, Elizabeth and Zechariah's story should sound very familiar to you. They're a faithful couple way past longing for their prayers to be answered; a couple, up there in years, who has not yet had a child. And Elizabeth, a woman

beyond the age of child-bearing, through the miraculous intervention of God, bears a son. If Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac are ringing a bell here, then congratulations - you have won the prize that the Narrative Lectionary is trying to give you!...An understanding of the arc of the biblical narrative and how certain themes and motifs repeat themselves again and again - different times and different people, same promises fulfilled and same faithful God.

As Luke begins his story with Zechariah and Elizabeth it feels a little like *déjà vu*, doesn't it? Haven't we heard this story before? Luke wants us to feel familiarity with this story to show us that how God is acting today in the present is how God has always acted in the past. There is continuity to God's faithfulness. And, Luke wants us to sense also that something new is happening as well. But he knows that if he doesn't ground this new thing in the tradition of the past, that we may not believe it. We, the people of God, do not have a good track record when it comes to believing what God will do in our lives, and Luke knows it.

And gosh - Zechariah should have known better too, right?! When Zechariah, a priest who had been trained his whole life for this moment in time - this special moment when his number was called to enter the holy of holies to do his priestly duties - a man who would have studied the scriptures day in and day out and known them by heart - when this god-fearing, faithful man, Zechariah, is met by the angel - he of all people should have been like, *"Oh, I know what this is...this is God speaking to me...just as God spoke to Abraham and Sarah through those 3 visitors, and to Moses through the burning bush, and to Elijah through the fire from heaven, and to Elisha through the still small voice, etcetera, etcetera."*

But, was that Zechariah's response? No. Of course not. No matter how well any of us know the stories of God and no matter how much we believe that God works in our lives...if and when God speaks to us - we can't believe it. We doubt. We question. We deny. We are in shock. And I think that it's proof that while stories can inspire us, stories don't really

transform us unless we allow ourselves to truly step into the storyline....unless we allow ourselves to move from being audience members to protagonists. I believe God is always inviting us to step into that storyline, we just probably miss the invitation most days.

For Zechariah, the invitation was loud and clear: *“your wife’s going to have a child, and you’ll name him John, and he will turn the people of Israel back to God, so that they are ready to receive Jesus.”*

Zechariah is stuck in his rational scientific mind trying to make sense of this and replies, *“What?! But my wife is old...we can’t have kids!”*

At which point (cue the eye-roll of the angelic messenger here) Gabriel sighs and shakes his head thinking *“I hoped you’d be different Zechariah”*...and replies slightly sarcastically, *“Hello?! I’m GABRIEL. God’s angel. This is not a joke. I am not a joke. I am a messenger from God. This is good news for you and your wife. But - because you didn’t believe me at first, no more talking for you...until the prophecy I just*

told you comes true.” I kind of picture this scene like one from Harry Potter, where Gabriel pulls out a magic wand and holds it up to Zechariah’s mouth and says, *“Accio Zechariah’s vocal chords”* - *“Thy mouth be shut!”*

The newly mute Zechariah, completes his duties as priest, and stumbles out of the holy of holies and back into the crowd of people who had been praying outside the temple and even though he had no physical voice at that time...he was still trying to proclaim something to them. He was motioning like a madman trying to charades his way into an explanation of what had happened to him. It’s not clear that the people ever understood him, but apparently his wife did. That’s what umpteen years of marriage will do - you can understand the wild, unruly gestures of your beloved without having to try too hard.

And eventually, Elizabeth gives birth to a baby boy and as was the custom when she and Zechariah brought him to the temple to be circumcised, the people started into this naming ceremony of sorts fully ready to

name him after his dad, Zechariah Jr. But Elizabeth interrupts them and says, “*No, his name is John,*” which is baffling to them because no one in their family is named John. And of course, because the mother’s word wasn’t enough, they turn to the father, and Zechariah gets out the tablet he’s been carrying around for months and writes what she just said, verifying that “*Yes, his name is John.*” Now, I’m not gonna lie. This would have been an awesome moment in scripture if he would have just written, “*Listen to his mother; she’s right*” but alas. In any case, the point is made, and the baby is named John.

But beyond the baby getting the name that God wanted him to have, in that moment of chalkboard proclamation, of Zechariah writing down his son’s name, he regains his ability to speak. And it’s as if levies broke and the floodgates were opened and Zechariah couldn’t stop speaking. And instead of saying all the things he wished he could have said to his wife and neighbors over the past 9 months, he starts flooding God with what scholars call a song or poem of

praise. But it wasn’t just any song of praise. It was a song of praise-filled prophecy.

Zechariah repeats the prophetic promises of Jeremiah and Isaiah saying, “*God has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David*” and “*this Messiah will save us from our enemies and those who oppress us, and God will show us mercy and remember his covenant, etcetera, etcetera.*” The first half of his song is about the Savior who is coming. He continues in the vein of the voices of the prophets before him. And then turns to the child at hand. In a very priestly and pastoral and fatherly moment of blessing, Zechariah says to HIS son, as Eugene Peterson imagines it in the Message translation of Luke 1: 76-79:

And you, my child, “Prophet of the Highest,”

will go ahead of the Master
to prepare his ways,
Present the offer of salvation
to his people,
the forgiveness of their sins.

Through the heartfelt mercies
of our God,
God’s Sunrise

will break in upon us,
Shining on those in the darkness,
those sitting
in the shadow of death,
Then showing us the way,
one [step] at a time,
down the path of peace.

We all know that John the Baptist was the prophet who paved the way for his cousin Jesus. He started preaching and teaching and baptizing and was just crazy enough with his camel hair and locust and honey diet that when Jesus came, the people probably thought, *“Well this Jesus-guy is kind of nuts, but at least he’s not as crazy as that John guy.”* As an adult, John lived into the prophetic words his dad spoke to him. He gave knowledge of salvation to the people, he forgave their sins and baptized them, he told them that someone greater than him was coming. John the Baptist was a prophet who paved the way for Jesus, the ultimate Messiah who would come to usher in a whole new way of life and living.

If John paved the way for Jesus, then Zechariah paved the way for his son, John. And the prophets and priest Jeremiah and Isaiah and Ezra paved the

way for Zechariah. It’s a long and winding road, full of tradition and wisdom and that cloud of witnesses that we always talk about.

And while we just catch Zechariah at the tail end of his life and ministry, we see that he is able to be prophetic and proclaim this message through gestures, through silence, through writing, and through song. None of the typical mediums we think about when it comes to prophesying and proclamation, right? When it comes to prophets we tend to think of ancient writing in scrolls or sermons from pastors in fancy robes behind a pulpit or social justice marches in the streets.

But you don’t have to be a profound public speaker or a self-proclaimed activists to proclaim God’s love and peace and justice in the world. You can do it through your actions, no matter how wild and unruly like Zechariah’s motions coming out of the temple. Someone will understand you. And you will get the message across to someone who otherwise wouldn’t hear it.

And just like during
Zechariahs' mute period, you
can proclaim the message of
God's good news through
silence, through being a
constant presence of support,
and through being a humble
student of prayer and study, so
that when you do speak, your
words hold power in a room
like no other. We all know
people like that. Who rarely
speak, but when they do, we
listen.

And just like how Zechariah
scribbled "*His name is John*"
on a chalkboard, you can
proclaim the good news of God
through writing, through
putting into words what people
may be able to digest at a
slower pace as they read it as an
article or even as a letter (to a
family member), when they
wouldn't be able to take it in in
the same way through a
conversation or a speech.
People who are visual learners
need the written word because
their auditory comprehension
and retention is not as strong as
their reading and seeing.

And just like how Zechariah
broke out in poetry and/or in
song, we need the good news
proclaimed through music, and
really through all of the arts,
because as poet Emily
Dickinson so wisely mused:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —¹

Sometimes in order for our
prophetic word to be heard, we
must speak it in a way that
invites the listener in from
alongside them, and doesn't
accost them from head on. The
truth must dazzle gradually, not
be blinding as Emily says.
Music does this. Art does this.
Poetry does this.

You see, the prophetic path is
not just for the great orators or
preachers of our day. It is for
all of us. All of us are
responsible for being prophets
in our world today; in whatever
ways we can to give dignity to

¹ Poem 1263 by Emily Dickinson. Source: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998). Accessed on

Dec. 22, 2019 at
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56824/tell-all-the-truth-but-tell-it-slant-1263>.

the poor, the oppressed, the immigrant, the refugee, the veteran, the under-served, under-paid, under-housed, under-fed. Being prophetic often it means finding ways beyond the spoken word to proclaim a message of love and peace in a world that needs not just the Light and Love of Jesus, the Christ-Child...but also the Light and Love of you and me as well.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, *“For though my faith is not yours and your faith is not mine, if we each are free to light our own flames, together we can banish some of the darkness in our world.”*

Prophets aren't just a thing of the past. They aren't just in the Old Testament. Jesus literally had a prophet in his day and age, a relative no less, his contemporary, who was paving the path for him. Their ministries overlapped. And it was only when John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod, that Jesus' ministry really took off (the baton was passed), and that's also when the stakes became so much higher for Jesus. He knew that death was coming if he continued to speak

his prophetic voice of justice and love with his prophetic acts of compassion. And we know, his voice and path cost him his life.

But remember how the story goes? God is faithful. The promises don't fade, even when the prophets die. New life is born out of the soil that the prophets before us tilled.

My question for us today is this: if Jesus needed prophets way long before him to prepare the way for his message, and if he even needed a contemporary to help him on the prophetic path...then doesn't it follow that what proved to be true before him also must be true after him? That Jesus needs prophets who were his contemporaries who immediately carried out his ministry and message - like the disciples and apostles...but also that he needs prophets and proclaimers long after him, just as he had those long before him, also proclaiming the prophetic message of peace and love and a way of living and being in the world that unifies rather than divides, that welcomes rather than excludes, that privileges the poor rather

than the powerful - that brings all people onto a level playing field where we can all know ourselves as beloved and know everyone else as beloved too.

The prophetic path doesn't end at Bethlehem. It continues onto 6500 E. Girard Ave - the NE corner of Hampden and Monaco.

This has been a low week for us as a country. The lowest of lows. It's hard not to feel disheartened and even agitated during these days leading up to Christmas. The process of impeachment - no matter what you think of it - is something a country never wants to have to through. Our divisions are deep. We can't talk to each other. We are quick to disparage and dismiss and question and are slow to listen and clarify and understand. Perhaps this make our anticipation of Christmas and our need for Christ all the greater. The prophets remind us that no human leader or system of government is our Savior, our salvation (that is, our healing and wholeness - *the meaning of salvation is deliverance from harm*). No, only God can bring our

salvation. As much power as we give our leaders, the prophetic path is not paved with presidents or politicians, but rather with people - people like you and me...who dare to believe the good news that Zechariah proclaimed so many years ago, that:

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace," (Luke 1:78-29).

Christmas morning is yet one stop on a prophetic path that has been leading from God's heart to your heart for years...it is a stop, a breath, a pause, a celebration that is important. For it gives us the Light that we need to continue the journey. But the journey must continue. And we must become prophets for the message of God's love and good news today. And as we see in Zechariah's story today - proclamation comes in many forms - through actions and motions, through silence, through writing, through speech, through poetry and song. Pick your path of proclamation - any one of them

or all of them - and keep journeying. Rest in Bethlehem when you need to. Ponder the Love of Jesus alongside Mary as long as you need at the manger. But then, get back up when you can and keep walking.

The prophetic path is long and winding, but it is full of promises...promises fulfilled and promises anticipated and all the stuffy in between.

Just as the season of Advent creates this time for us where as we are waiting for Christmas we are also somehow simultaneously experiencing it...so too is the feeling on the prophetic path. That, as we are following it, trying to see where it leads, we are somehow, mysteriously, also creating it ourselves, laying the bricks with our words and deeds, finding our way even as we follow The Way.

This prophetic path has brought us from Bethlehem to Denver. Where will it take us now?

Or, where will *we* take *it*?

Amen.