

Pastor's Message – 12/5/2021
2nd Sunday of Advent
Prepare Ye: A Series of Special Services for Advent
Pray

I am fortunate for many reasons, and one of them is the benefit I have with my health insurance company. They partner with a fitness program that pays incentives for reaching health goals. I bought a new fitness device last month because I couldn't read the too small numbers on my previous device and this new one records and reports all kinds of data: not just steps, but heart rate, oxygen levels, active minutes, and other things. It even records my sleep.

My Fitbit Versa 2 tells me how much time I am awake and how much time I spend in sleep during the night: light sleep, deep sleep, and REM sleep. REM sleep is important because it stimulates the areas of the brain that help with learning and is associated with increased production of proteins. Usually, REM sleep happens 90 minutes after you fall asleep. The first period of REM typically lasts 10 minutes. Each of your later REM stages gets longer, and the final one may last up to an hour. Your heart rate and breathing quickens.

You can have intense dreams during REM sleep, since your brain is more active. There have been times when I have woken up just enough from a particularly intense dream to be able to convince myself that it is only a dream. Sometimes dreams and visions can be disturbing and frightening.

In our Bible readings today, we hear about two biblical characters who had particularly intense dreams and visions: Jacob and Zechariah. Jacob dreams of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven and realizes a connection with heaven. His dream is comforting because he becomes aware that "Surely the presence of the LORD is in this place." "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

Zechariah has a different experience. As you read the Bible, you will realize that whenever an angel appears, people are frightened. The angels always say, "Do not be afraid." Zechariah, like any sane person in the Bible, is terrified by the sight of the angel there in the temple. Zechariah can't believe what the angel told him. For this hesitancy to trust the Lord's messenger, Zechariah is struck dumb.

So, there's Zechariah, the unwilling convert to Quakerism, rendered speechless. He walks out of the temple. The people know he had a vision, but Zechariah is unable to tell the people about what he saw and heard. (Remember, visions are more than pictures.) His term at the temple ends and he heads home to Elizabeth. She conceives.

"At this time," Luke 1:7 tells us, "they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years." In Luke 1:25, Elizabeth describes this barrenness as "a disgrace among the people." In those days, if you had children, you had everything. Conversely, if you had no children, you had nothing. Zechariah and Elizabeth longed for a child. Now it appeared too late. They were both too old. It seemed as though that ship had sailed and that train had left the station. "They were both well along in years." They had

been waiting for what must have seemed like an eternity! Her pregnancy had been a long time in coming and Zechariah and Elizabeth had already pretty well given up.

I wonder how much they had prepared. Did they have all the equipment for a baby? Was the playpen set up and the crib in the baby's room? Was it already painted and decorated? What kind of preparations did they make while they were waiting?

Last week Sunday, with the first Sunday in the season of Advent, Christian churches began a season of waiting. We start getting ready for Christmas. Advent doesn't get any attention outside the church, and often it does not get much attention within the church. John, who we call the Baptist, Zechariah and Elizabeth's son, is the person who exemplifies the season.

In truth, of course, Advent is a season that our broader culture observes and experiences but does not acknowledge. They call those weeks leading up to Christmas "the Christmas season." But inasmuch as those weeks are characterized by looking forward, counting down, and preparing, it truly is the Advent season.

On the church calendar, the Advent season is just over four weeks long. In our culture at large, the Advent season may be longer, for the Christmas displays and advertisements appear earlier and earlier. The longest Advent season, however, was the historical one: that is, the centuries of looking forward, waiting, and preparing that the people of God -- indeed, the whole world -- experienced prior to Christ's coming.

I expect many(?), most(?), all(?), of you have been getting ready for Christmas. I mentioned last week that I had my light nets on the bushes at the Parsonage. This past week I put my lighted spiral Christmas tree on the front lawn and hung the lighted star on the house. Yesterday, I went hunting for my Christmas tree at Stanton's tree farm. It's up, but not fully decorated yet. We do all of these physical preparations, and hopefully you're doing spiritual preparations as well.

But maybe you're not there yet. Maybe you're like Zechariah and Elizabeth, waiting for children but not able to conceive. Or maybe you're single, desperately waiting to be married, but it just hasn't happened. Maybe you've been married for decades and you're waiting for the sparkle and shine to return. Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, we can all feel hopeless and helpless when it comes to waiting. End of story? No way! God intervened!

God makes promises and God's promises never fail. God's promises never end. Israel's three matriarchs Sarah, Abraham's wife, (Genesis 11:30), Rebekah, Isaac's wife, (Genesis 25:21) and Rachel, Jacob's wife, (Genesis 29:31) were all barren at one time. So was Hannah, the mother of Samuel (1 Samuel 1:5). All four women eventually had children. Elizabeth and Zechariah must have believed that, if God did it—not once, but four times—God can do it again!

If God was faithful to Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah, he will be faithful to you. God loves you. God's promises for you in Jesus Christ never, ever end! You may have given up on you. But God will never give up on you. He replaces barrenness and brokenness with goodness and grace!

God's presence never disappoints. "He [Zechariah] was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense" (Luke

1:9). The honor attached to the incense offering is marked by its location. The incense altar is in the Holy Place, outranked in terms of holiness only by the Holy of Holies. Zechariah is as close to the presence of God as any person—other than the high priest—would ever get. Last week, our Advent wreath theme was “hope.” This week it is “peace.” The one particular name for Jesus that comes to mind in this Advent time is “Prince of Peace.”

Taken from Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 9:6), this name heralds one who can and will lead us to peace, if only we would let him. Into a world fractured with the horrors of war, this baby Jesus comes to “guide our feet into the way of peace,” as the prophecy of Zechariah puts it. But the real question is, will we let ourselves be guided?

Accompanying this “mighty Savior” that is to be raised up for us, is our own stupidity as a people. God may be looking favorably on us in this season, but we ourselves are blinded by the blood of the innocents. How can we embrace the peace that Christ brings when we are busy tearing one another apart in countless spots around the globe?

Oh, yes. Some say that war is horrible, but sometimes necessary. Jesus says, “Love your enemy” (Matthew 5:43). Some say that we have to protect our interests and save ourselves. Jesus says you have to lose your life to gain new life in him (Luke 9:24). Some say that God is on their side as the bodies pile up in dreadful counting. But God is only on the side of life, wanting it in abundance for all people (John 10:10).

There is no getting around it. Violence and warfare are contrary to the mind of Christ and the will of God. In this Advent time, the people who wear the name of Christ are called, indeed are challenged, to allow them to be guided into the way of peace. Allowing ourselves to be guided means that we must give up the delusion that we are leading. We must stop and allow God's love in Christ Jesus to lead us. Allowing ourselves to be guided means that we don't necessarily have all the answers. We need to be open to the leading of the Spirit. Allowing ourselves to be guided also means that we let go of our own ideas of the ultimate destination and open ourselves to the presence of God – open ourselves to the gift of Jesus.

Zechariah eventually realizes, and tells everyone, that his son, John, will announce that the dawn from on high, who is Jesus, will come upon us, and that he will shine into this dark world where we live, right here where we live in the very shadow of death, and that he will guide our feet into the way of peace. In our troubled world today, with all its wars and rumors of war, we need our Lord to guide us into this way of peace, this way of living together as his people.

Because of Zechariah's experience, his vision, in the temple, he has access to God's presence. The angel announces God's plan and makes a promise and God's plans never fail. God gave Elizabeth and Zechariah a child. And God's promise is that this child —John the Baptist— “... will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children” (Luke 1:17). God's plan is to turn our hearts towards home, to replace vengeance and bitterness with forgiveness and love. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of the children towards their parents!

Now comes the task of living into this reality or kingdom. The knowledge of salvation is ours. The pathway to peace is lit. The challenge now, is not to wait idly for some future

event, but instead to live boldly and joyfully into the present reality of the kingdom of God. This is a reality where sins are forgiven, where the hungry are fed, and the homeless are housed. It is a present process where the people engage in the building of justice and the making of peace.

This prophecy of Zechariah has been realized. The Messiah has come. The kingdom is, as scripture tells us, "near" to us. Now it is our turn. We, the faithful and we, the ones who have faith, must dare to lean into this reality. The trick is to take the risk of living in this moment as though it were all true. The hope is for Christian communities everywhere to become islands where this reality, this kingdom is built, strengthened, and nurtured. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for (he) has looked favorably upon his people and redeemed them."

Today is the day to embrace this redemption, to receive, and to live in the kingdom. As you prepare for Christmas, make it a time to remember what and who you are preparing for. Tell the stories, God says, for God remembers us. Here is a wonderful reminder that our stories are in fact a part of God's story! Our stories are important because they are, each and every one of them, a part of who our God is. "God has remembered us in God's new covenant." We tell the stories of our triumphs, forgiveness, light, and more because they are stories of who God is! Even stories of fiction and fairy tales, all stories of light overcoming darkness are inevitably a story of God. Because they are a part of what makes humans human and therefore what makes God, God.

Make those preparations and your reflections your prayer and your connection to God. As were the Chrismons we focused on last year, let the wall decorations and the Christmas tree and the lights and the Christmas card and even the parties be as your ladder stretching from earth to heaven. Make those preparations your prayer to the God who blesses us and wants most of all to make us and the world new. Reach out to God as God reaches out to us. May your preparations be worship.

As preacher John MacArthur says, "Worship ... is an attitude. It is a spirit, something on the inside. It is an attitude of the heart that is so filled with wonder and gratitude at what God has done that there is not a thought of personal needs or personal blessings, only total abandonment to God in praise and adoration." That's worship. It is the most selfless thing we do. It is, as the hymn writer puts it, to be lost in wonder, love, and praise. It is to be so grateful and so filled with wonder at what the Lord has done that we lose ourselves in adoring worship and adoring praise. What better time for this than Christmas when we focus on the very giving of Christ who is our Savior?