

1—Advent—The Promised Forerunner: The Advent of John the Baptist

I. Introduction

- a. How might you prepare for Christmas? Will it be a white or blue Christmas? While Bing Crosby woos us to dream of a white Christmas and it can't be any other way—"may your days be merry and bright." Or Elvis reminds us of those blue snowflakes start falling. And who can go through Christmas without Nat "King" Cole singing "The Christmas Song" to us? Then we think (maybe in a panic) I need to get my shopping done. What should I get someone who doesn't need anything? How will I pay for "Christmas" this year? We will just put it on the card and maybe have it paid for by next Christmas. Which family gathering will I go to this year? They are either on the same day or too far away to make them both. Or I somehow make it to them all we had a blast. It was just the most special Christmas we've ever had. Family and friends and gifts and good food. It was just magical.
- b. I'm not sure I can compete with all of these. They have a strong, warm appeal. And they are great in many ways. I guess I want remind you and point you to something that lasts longer—much longer. I hope somewhere in there we can "find room" for the simple message of Christmas that Christ has come to give the greatest gift the world will ever know—himself.
- c. As we enter the Advent season, we want to keep our eyes on the promises of God because we need to be reminded that God is faithful. And in the word Advent, which means coming, we hear the promise that God would send salvation through the coming of Messiah.
- d. That promise includes not only the coming of the Messiah but the coming of the forerunner. Indeed, he must come first and his coming is miraculous too and worthy of our attention.
- e. Let's look into these glorious things as we prepare for Christmas—the birth of the Messiah!

II. Main Point

- a. God keeps his promise to send Elijah before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

III. Outline

- a. Promises Made
- b. Promises Fulfilled
- c. Our Comfort is Coming

IV. Exposition

- a. As the outline suggests and what we just read in the Gospel of Luke that this one who is coming will make ready for the Lord a people prepared. It would be good to see where God made these promises first. Let's see the Lord's faithfulness to keep his promises to send the forerunner this morning.
 - i. God warned Judah in Isaiah 39 that exile was coming. And in 586 B.C. around 100 years later, Judah went into exile at the hands of the Babylonian army. Why? Because they had repeatedly broken God's covenant and would not return to him.
 - ii. In Isaiah 40:27, Isaiah speaks of what Israel will do when they are in exile and he says they will blame God for failing them. In the midst of this, God comes not to destroy them but "to comfort them with a promise, with a hope that doesn't depend on us but only on himself." (Ortlund 232).
 1. Hear these words from (Isa. 40:1-5) Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

2. I bring this up because the voice who cries in the wilderness preparing the way to the Lord is none other than the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth.
 3. So, the comfort that was to come began with this one who came to prepare the way.
 4. It was a promise made. It is a promise we need to see fulfilled.
 - a. What will the voice crying in the wilderness come to say?
 - i. He will come to say the LORD is coming!
 1. He comes to them in the wilderness...in exile to save them...to bring them home!
 - ii. He will come to accomplish what 1000 years of Jewish history had so clearly proved. They cannot keep the covenant.
 - iii. And the forerunner will hail that the King of Glory has come who is Jesus Christ!
- iii. Of course, this promise was made in more than once. In (Mal. 3:1) it says "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.
1. Malachi prophesied after their return from the Babylonian exile. The prophet's name means "my messenger" which is symbolic of what God spoke through him because he delivered a message that the final messenger is coming.
 - a. This messenger would be preparing the people for the Kingdom of God to come.
 - i. Why did they need to be prepared? God has six disputes against Israel that Malachi was sent to tell them about (Sailhamer 436—what follows).
 1. 1:2-5—God had cared for Israel throughout the past, but Israel did not recognize or appreciate God's care. Israel was ungrateful.
 2. 1:6-2:9—Israel treated their offerings carelessly and thus dishonored God.
 3. 2:10-16—Israel profaned their covenant with God by marrying pagan women.
 4. 2:17-3:5—Though Israel might think that God would never carry out his plan of judgment against unrighteousness, God would soon send his messenger [with a command to repent].
 5. 3:6-12—Israel withheld their tithes and offerings from the Lord. If they gave to God, he would abundantly bless their land.
 6. 3:13-4:3—Israel was tired of waiting for God's blessing, but those who did wait would have a part in the divine blessing to come.
- iv. My guess is, when you hear these disputes, you would agree they need God to come and save them. But what we read in our Luke passage everything seems good. I mean you may look around and think this wilderness we call the world is good too. You may think everything is going well. You may not want to go home. You may like it in "Egypt" that is, slavery to sin.
1. Oh, I hope you feel your need for Jesus. I hope you long to see him. I hope you long to go home. I hope you are eager to leave behind your sojourning in this foreign land.
 2. But none of that is possible unless God keeps his promises. It's not possible if the forerunner doesn't come and prepare the way.
 3. Let's see if God kept his promises.

b. In the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, we get a detailed explanation that the promises made are indeed fulfilled.

- i. We must remember, the last time God spoke to the people was 400 years ago. This announcement is the beginning of the amazing work of God to save his people from their sins!
 - 1. God does things over long periods of time. You might wonder, why is God so slow to accomplish these things?
 - a. One reason that I have alluded to already is that like the 1000 years of covenant unfaithfulness proves what we will sing at some point in the song 'O Holy Night.' The first verse says, "O holy night, the stars are brightly shining; it is the night of our dear Savior's birth. Long lay the world in sin and error pinning."
 - i. "Instead of seeking God and doing good, the world (in error) pines after lesser things, idols crafted by human hands."

"Pining is one of those older words we don't hear very often. It does refer to a desperate longing, but it also has a more archaic meaning of discontent and fret. Both reflect what the Bible tells us about the state of the world. In rebellion against God it seeks satisfaction in things that do not satisfy. It is a restless world that will not embrace the one cure that can save it." (First Things blog)

- ii. And when God decides to speak, he not only takes a longtime to do it but he also follows the same patterns he has used before so that you will know that he's the one doing it.
 - 1. Right off the bat, we hear of the two people God will work through to bring about this great and awesome salvation—Zachariah and Elizabeth.
 - a. Zachariah is a priest of the division of Abijah.
 - i. This was part of the organization David arranged in I Chronicles 24. The priests all had different tasks they were assigned to do. Zachariah's division was responsible for offering incense twice a day.
 - b. Elizabeth is of the daughters of Aaron.
 - i. This would sound prestigious since Aaron was the first high priest but it would also remind us of Egypt and the wilderness.
 - c. They are both described as righteous before God and walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes.
 - d. But they are childless.
 - i. And in very familiar words, Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years. This should remind you of Abraham and Sarah.
 - 1. In Abraham and Sarah's story, God made it impossible to happen any other way. It would be according to the promise. why? So that God would get the glory as he rightly deserves!
 - ii. So, this coming of the forerunner to prepare the way of the Lord will be impossible too apart from the Lord.
 - iii. And it's intended to be this way. It leaves no question that God did it. It makes clear that God is sovereign. The way it happened makes this clear but also the fact that God promised it over 500 years before it happened makes clear that God is doing it too.
 - 1. "The only thing that makes that kind of authoritative prediction possible is the sovereignty of God. He can say what is going to happen, because he *controls* what is going to happen. God sends his angel beforehand to predict these pregnancies rather

than sending him afterwards to explain them, because he wants to demonstrate unmistakably that he is in charge here. This is God's work. These births were not unusual coincidences found by God and used. They were ordained and ordered by his sovereign will." (Piper)

- iii. Additionally, this announcement comes while they worship. In their normal routines, God breaks the silence to one of the priests doing his normal duties.
 1. But, in the midst of these normal duties something extraordinary happens.
 - a. Yet, before we look at the amazing thing that happens, might I encourage you to keep doing the ordinary things God has ordained for us to do. Can you imagine, they had been waiting for 400 years for God to speak and he comes during worship?
 2. Not only what is about to happen extraordinary, but the way Zachariah happened to be this priest offering incense.
 - a. There were many priests in that day...possibly as many as 18,000. They had to chose one of the priests by casting lots.
 - b. It fell to Zachariah on this day. And there were so many priests that usually a priest would only get to do this one time in entire life of serving.
 3. So, as the whole multitude is praying outside at the hour of incense, an angel of the Lord appeared standing on the right side of the altar of incense.
 - a. As you would assume, this troubled Zachariah and fear fell upon him.
 - b. The angel of the Lord speaks: (Lk. 1:13-17) "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."
 - i. Do not fear! I bring good news of great joy! Your prayer has been answered!
 - ii. This child will do what Malachi said almost 400 years ago!
 - iii. I'm sure you can understand why Zachariah was startled. He did not wake that morning expecting to see the angel of the Lord and be given this birth announcement.
 - iv. What would you say to an angel who said you were going to have a child but your wife has been barren her entire life and not to mention she was well beyond that possibility at her age?
 4. Well, Zachariah shows us how not to speak to an angel!
 - a. (Lk. 1:18) "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."
 - b. The angel replies with a rebuke and causes him to be mute because he did not believe his words.
 - i. He's a priest of the Lord. He knows the stories of Abraham and Sarah and many others like Hannah and Rebecca.
 - ii. He serves the Lord in worship. He prays. But when all that he worships and prays for happens he doesn't believe.

