

MOUNT OLIVET ADVENT & CHRISTMAS 2023 DEVOTIONAL





First Sunday of Advent

NOVEMBER 26, 2023

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

LUKE 1:5-17

“WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?”



SCRIPTURE:

LUKE 1:5-17

“WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?”

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once, when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, “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. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

In this week's passage, we learn to detect a pattern of God's activity that goes all the way back to Abraham and Sarah, comes to the forefront in Luke's story of the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, and continues up until the present. When we read these stories, we're invited not only to learn how God worked long ago, but also get better at detecting how God works now, today, in and through us, for the sake of the world God loves.

— PASTOR LOSE



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2023

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

LUKE 1:5-7

Certain literary genres have recognizable patterns. When you read a fairy tale, you know the knight in shining armor will save the damsel in distress. In mysteries, the characters are different but the patterns similar: the smart, careful sleuth will solve her case, catching the culprit and revealing all in the last scene.

Biblical literature is like that, too, and anyone reading Luke – whether in the first or twenty-first century – can detect clues that set our expectations, this time not for a rescue or a solution to a mystery, but for a miracle.

Here is the first clue: two righteous and faithful people are too old to have children. This story is reminiscent of that of Abraham and Sarah, who were also faithful, barren, too old to have children, and entertained messengers from God in what seemed like a chance meeting. Yet from these two came Isaac and eventually the whole nation of Israel.

Why does this seem to be a pattern of God's activity? Or, more to the point, why does God do that – choosing highly unlikely people to accomplish God's work? Probably so that we don't forget that it is God who is accomplishing this. Zechariah and Elizabeth, like Abraham and Sarah before them, are faithful, but also mortal. God is the one responsible for the miracle. But – and perhaps this is the second miracle – God chooses to accomplish God's work through ordinary, faithful people, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, like Abraham and Sarah, and like you and me.

– PASTOR LOSE

*Dear God, let us be open to the miracles you seek to work through ordinary people like us.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*



TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2023

Once, when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

LUKE 1:8-11

Once... upon a time. Once... in a galaxy far, far away. Once... when he was serving as priest before God. Again we find a clue that something extraordinary is about to happen. “Once.” It’s a simple word, but it also designates something singular, something unique. So also in this story of Zechariah the priest: “Once, when he was serving as a priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot.”

Everything about this scene is ordinary. Priests serve before God. They have a rotation of when they are on duty, kind of like our ushers or parking lot crew. The one who goes into the sanctuary is chosen by lot; that is, by chance. While he’s inside, people are outside praying, like they always do. Everything about this scene is ordinary.

Yet in the middle of the ordinary, something extraordinary happens. An angel of the Lord appears. And the rest of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s life – indeed, the rest of history – will never be the same.

It’s easy to overlook how often extraordinary things happen in the middle of ordinary moments. But if we look, we might be amazed at just how often that is where God shows up. You know, like “once, while he was changing his daughter’s diaper, Joe realized just how blessed he was.” Or “once, while on her commute to work, Lisa called a friend who desperately needed someone to talk to.”

So what ordinary things do you have planned today? Whatever it is, watch out, God may be there, ahead of you, planning something extraordinary. And someday, when you tell the tale, you may just start out, “Once, when I...”

– PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, grant us eyes to see your extraordinary work amid our ordinary lives.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.



WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2023

Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.”

LUKE 1:11-13a

Zechariah has good reason to be afraid. He’s in the Temple, alone, when an angel – a heavenly being, an emissary from God, a creature that lives in the very presence of God – appears. This is something few mortals have seen... and live to tell the tale. So, yes, he has good reason to be afraid.

But then the angel speaks: “Do not be afraid.” And Zechariah knows – even if he’s still a little afraid – that all will be well. Because throughout scripture, “do not be afraid” is code language for “something great is about to happen.” So also here. Zechariah and Elizabeth will soon be with child. And that child, whom they will name John, will go ahead of the promised Messiah to announce the good news that God will redeem God’s people – and all the world! – through Jesus!

But before we get to that part of the story, keep in mind that those words – “do not be afraid” – not only appear here in the story of the priest Zechariah, but are actually the most frequently repeated words in the Bible. That’s right. The most common command in scripture is not “love the Lord your God” or even “love your neighbor,” let alone, “thou shalt” or “thou shalt not.” Rather, the most common command is “do not be afraid.”

Why? Because God knows that life can be stressful, at times overwhelming, even frightening. And God is not about fear, but about trust... and confidence... and love. And so then, as now, God’s word to us is the same: “Do not be afraid... because I am with you!”

– PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, let us remember your promise to be with us always and find courage to face the challenges of the day. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2023

“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. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

LUKE 1:13-15

The instructions of the angel may appear to us to be a bit odd, with a specific name, and instructions about alcohol, and more. But... each of these elements has significance.

Abstaining from “wine or strong drink” is the mark of a Nazarite, one who has been dedicated to the service of the Lord. In the Old Testament, the judge Samson was a Nazarite, as was the prophet Samuel. Similarly, in the angel’s command, we hear the promise that this child will be dedicated to the service of God.

And then there’s the name, John. Not David, following in the line of Israel’s greatest king. Or Jeremiah, one of Israel’s greatest prophets. Or even Elijah, the prophet who was foretold would return before the messiah. (Interestingly, people later refer to John as another Elijah, as he goes ahead of Jesus the Messiah.)

Rather, he is to be named John. Which means, in Hebrew, “God is gracious.” Because that is the promise John will announce. Yes, God gives us laws to follow. Of course, God is committed to justice. Absolutely, God is pained, even angry, when we hurt each other and ourselves. But above and beyond all of this, God is gracious. And nowhere will we see that demonstrated more fully than in the cross of Jesus, the one John is born to precede, the one he goes ahead of to prepare the way, the one he foretells.

John, the one who is dedicated to showing in word and deed that, indeed, God is gracious. Always.

– PASTOR LOSE

*Dear God, whatever may be going on in our lives today, remind us that you are gracious.
In Jesus’ name, Amen.*



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2023

“He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

LUKE 1:16-17

There’s that name – Elijah! Yesterday we noticed that John is named, well, John, not David or Jeremiah, or Elijah. And, frankly, Elijah would have made some sense, because Elijah is the singular character in the Old Testament whose death is never reported. Rather, at the end of his prophetic career, he is taken away into the heavens by chariot, and it was promised that he would return in the same way to announce the coming of God’s messiah. Because John comes ahead of Jesus, he is seen as “another Elijah.”

Interestingly, the promise is that John, with “the spirit and power of Elijah,” will “turn the hearts of parents to their children.” Not that John will grab the attention of the complacent, challenge the unrighteous authorities of the day, or make nervous the powerful, and comfort the afflicted. Actually, John will do all these things. But what the angels promise is that John will turn the hearts of parents to their children. That is, to remind us again of the power of love, parental love, sacrificial love. Nothing else is stronger, and this reminder and message is what will prepare the people of God to receive their messiah.

Here comes John – the one whose name means “God is gracious” – to announce that God’s favor knows no bounds and God’s compassion has no limits. Let’s get ready, for this John, this prophet, prepares us to receive Jesus, the Emmanuel, God with us.

– PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, remind us in Jesus of your abounding, unending love and in this way turn our hearts to you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2023

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years."

LUKE 1:18

We'll venture one verse further into the story, treading lightly on this Sunday's passage and next week's readings because, well, it brings us full circle. Because in addition to the various clues we've seen earlier – two unlikely people through whom God will accomplish God's work, God showing up in the ordinary to do extraordinary things, there's a final clue to the miraculous that Luke offers: disbelief.

Again, the biblical pattern is clear: Sarah laughed when she overheard the messengers tell Abraham she would have a child. And now Zechariah disbelieves and, as we'll hear next week, is rendered mute, not so much as a punishment but as a sign that when all these things come to pass, so also will his speech be restored.

So... at the conclusion of this week's passage, with various clues sprinkled through the story like breadcrumbs on a trail through the woods, we might ask, why the elaborate set up? Because biblical authors, from the narrators of Genesis to Luke, love to point out that nothing is impossible for God. Barren? What of it – God is the giver of life. Old? So what – God is the renewer of all things. Chance encounters? Hah – not when God is involved. Ordinary setting? Nothing is ordinary when God is on the scene. And, finally, disbelief? Come on – when it comes to the miraculous, most of us are taken off guard.

So, are you feeling kind of ordinary, or beset by a challenge that seems overwhelming, or are not sure you have it in you to do what you feel called to do? Well, get ready, because our God loves to take ordinary people facing ridiculous challenges and do extraordinary things through them. First it was Isaac, child of promise and laughter. Then it was John, set apart like the prophets of old to herald the coming Messiah. Next... Who knows? Maybe it will be you. – PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, you delight in taking unlikely people and doing wondrous things with them, for them, and through them. May we be open to your movement and purpose and so be instruments of your grace, mercy and peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Second Sunday of Advent

DECEMBER 3, 2023

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

LUKE 1:18-25

"ARE WE THERE YET?"



SCRIPTURE:
LUKE 1:18-25
“ARE WE THERE YET?”

Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.’ The angel replied, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.’

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ‘This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.’

This week in Advent, the devotions focus on the latter part of the encounter between Zechariah and the angel Gabriel in the temple in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. It includes Zechariah being struck mute as a consequence for his questioning the angel’s message and the subsequent fulfillment of the promise in Elizabeth becoming pregnant. With any birth there may be much hope, anticipation, and understandable worry. Amid this story, God is present. The story may guide us in the reality of our own hopes, worries, and anticipations to give us faith.

– PASTOR RUUD



MONDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2023

Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.”

LUKE 1:18

Zechariah has slowly become one of my favorite characters in scripture, not least of which because he is so honest. Here’s a guy who was known to be dutiful in the community. He went about his work and his life with care and integrity, following God’s commands, and we hear the same of his wife Elizabeth. Yet as it often happens in the Biblical story, we find our own questions validated as he asks, “How will I know that I can trust this?” It’s so honest and human.

“How can I trust that you are working, God? Can I have some more proof of your promises, your presence, your existence?”

Have you ever prayed these questions? It’s not an easy place to be, nor are there often satisfactory answers. Yet, I think that’s part of the point of Zechariah’s story. Zechariah needed God to gift him faith as much as any of us. Even the most faithful among us have our doubts. Even the most dutiful may wish for more proof of the Creator’s will in our lives. Old Zeke shows that if we are in a time of not being able to give words to faith, it doesn’t mean God isn’t working. After all, it is often only after we’ve been through a time of uncertainty and doubt that we are able to look back and fully articulate how God was leading and guiding, working in, through, and around us all along.

– PASTOR RUUD

Gracious God, you know how we long for proof that you are present and active. Thank you for sticking with us. Send us your peace, and help us endure until the time our hearts and voices are opened to sing your praise anew, in Jesus’ name. Amen.



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2023

'But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

LUKE 1:20

The angel Gabriel shows up and declares a seemingly ridiculous prospect. Zeke and Liz, in their old age, shall have a child. Understandably, Zechariah doubts, or at minimum asks for a bit more evidence, and Gabriel seems to take offense. It's God's promise. Gabe is just the messenger, but it seems he's not in the mood to take any lip from Zechariah. "I've shown up here to give you this amazingly good news and you dare question it?! Be grateful and receive it!" he seems to retort, and so renders Zeke mute for nine months.

It seems like punishment, but what if Zechariah's forced silence is a gift? (I know some pregnant mothers might be thinking, "It'd be great to have my partner be silent for nine months!") Now, unable to voice anything or ask any more questions, Zechariah can only watch and receive. He is rendered utterly passive.

It reminds me of a time later when Jesus will visit two sisters, Mary and Martha, and while Martha scurries about tending to tasks, Mary sits at Jesus' feet listening. "Mary has chosen the better part," Jesus says.

This season with all the hustle and bustle, maybe Gabriel's scolding of Zeke is a gifted reminder. Sit down! Be quiet! Quit fussing! Watch. Listen. Receive the wonder taking place. God is born in our flesh and blood. God's will is to have this promise grow right in front of your face. Receive it, nothing more.

— PASTOR RUUD

Holy God, amid all the strife, all the preparation, all the helter-skelter we force upon this season, send your angels to make us be quiet enough to watch what you do in and through Jesus Christ. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2023

When [Zechariah] did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak.

LUKE 1:22

Have you ever spoken too soon into a situation? My goodness, I can remember times when I put my foot in my mouth so far I tasted the dirt on the heel! It's not a pleasant feeling, to react too quickly, to say what shouldn't have been said, to let our emotive knee-jerk reactions get the better of us.

When Zechariah is struck dumb I wonder if maybe it's for his own good, and/or for the good of all who are going to witness the miracle. Perhaps there's nothing he can say which is going to help the situation, at least not for nine months! It serves as a forced time-out.

We may benefit from the reminder day to day to take a breath and ponder or learn a bit more before speaking. I know it's surely helpful for me. We all probably have certain triggers which can cause us to react or say things which are unhelpful or even hurtful to others. For those who wrestle with anger and/or when we sense the temperature rising in an argument, a time-out is often good medicine for being able to rethink, regroup, and re-center in peace.

I think about all the family gatherings happening this season. No doubt there will be some conversations which rile up old hurts or pains or poke at our nature to pounce before pondering. Maybe Zechariah's flailing arms might be a sort of humorous reminder that we need not speak all that comes to mind, especially if it threatens to rip us apart.

— PASTOR RUUD

God of peace, confront our hearts which tend to react too soon. Give all of us in this world a greater desire to understand one another and meet each other with the compassion with which you hold us. Amen.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2023

*After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months
she remained in seclusion.*

LUKE 1:24

I have no idea why Elizabeth remained in seclusion for five months. Reasons seem speculative at best. Being the Bible nerd that I am, I wondered if there was some ancient practice Elizabeth was following, but I can find nothing to suggest it. Maybe the first half of the pregnancy was rough on her body and health. Maybe she didn't want to let people know too soon in case it didn't come to fruition. If you have some insight, I'm all ears!

That aside, I imagine it was an astounding surprise to her community when she finally went out in public. Imagine yourself as her friend, knowing her long yearning and subsequent dashed hopes, and then laying eyes on her after nearly half a year and seeing the bump! Ahhhhhh! I can hear the shrieks of joy!

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (12:15). This season surely brings both, no doubt. I love how Luke tells the story because Luke seems to want to invite us into the whole ordeal, to feel the hardship of having been barren for years, and the joy at hopes fulfilled. Where is God? Right in the middle of it all.

If you grieve this season, know you are not alone in the slightest. If you're in seclusion, may the love of God meet you to bring new joy.

— PASTOR RUUD

*Loving God, keep our hearts open to weep and/or celebrate with each other in due season
and circumstance. Help us to know you embrace it all with love in your Son born to us.
Amen.*



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2023

*After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months
she remained in seclusion.*

LUKE 1:24

I write this devotion the week after war has broken out once again in the Middle East this fall. Scenes and reports of awful violence, not least of which upon innocent civilians and children on both sides, are near unbearable. It can feel like a hopeless mess which hits all the aspects of communal life – political, religious, familial, geographical. I confess to having no great insight or answer.

Sadly, it's nothing new with us humans. The particular struggle surrounding the Holy Land has been going on for millennia, and of course it's not unique to that place. This year there has been war in West Africa and the war in Ukraine forges on. No doubt there are other places around the world I'm forgetting. How does one hold it all?!

I note all of this given the focus of this week of Advent is peace. And at Mount Olivet, we're pondering the question, "Are we there yet?" We could decidedly answer, "No." And still, the Christmas story proclaims God's hope for us again. It proclaims that there is a peace waiting to be born among us.

Elizabeth waited in seclusion for five months in hopeful anticipation of showing the hope to the world. Can we be bold enough to enact that peace right now in places and among the people with whom we connect? Surely, it must start there. Are we there yet? No. But those who bear this story believe there are glimmers, we work toward it, and we trust that finally, there will be peace for all.

– PASTOR RUUD

*Holy God, blessed are the peacemakers. Bombard us with peace. Assail us with
compassion. Strike us with love, in Jesus' name. Amen.*



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2023

[Elizabeth] said, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

LUKE 1:25

The past mistakes, failures, dashed hopes and plans, or disgrace need not finally define you. I remember a good counselor saying this to me once, and it proved a helpful nugget in turning my perspective from the gloom, guilt, and grief in which I was stuck for some time. I try to remember it when those voices show up.

These days, hopefully none of us would shame or blame Elizabeth for not bearing children earlier, nor even if she never did, but she herself describes her situation as if she had born disgrace. Now it had been lifted by God. I hear an echo of that assertion when that very kid she carried, John the Baptist, proclaims about Jesus in the Gospel of John saying, “Here is lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29) I like to think John stole his mom’s sermon!

The past things need not define you. God’s mercy is new every day. Jesus comes to take away our disgrace, our sin, our fear, our failures. He is like a great burglar of all that weighs us down. It doesn’t mean we don’t carry the effects of the past. It means there’s still hope.

Sometimes we grieve how our dreams have been stymied. Another friend shared a word of wisdom once, saying, “Sometimes the dream has to change.” God provides a new dream for us. Leave the disgrace for Jesus.

– PASTOR RUUD

Lord, you're the great thief of sin and death. Help us to know that you have taken it for yourself, thus freeing us to a new life of freedom to dream again and again in your loving joyful abundance. Amen.



Third Sunday of Advent

DECEMBER 10, 2023

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

LUKE 1:26-28

“AN UNEXPECTED TURN”



SCRIPTURE:
LUKE 1:26-38
“AN UNEXPECTED TURN”

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'

Then the angel departed from her.

For the third week of Advent, our devotions focus on the annunciation, Gabriel's message from God to Mary and her initial response to that message. The conversation between the angel Gabriel and the poor, young Mary teems with wonder, surprise, courage, and trust. It shows us not only *how to live in the season of Advent* but also gives us glimpses into *who Jesus becomes for us* this and every season.

— REV. DR. THERESA LATINI



MONDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2023

BE A WITNESS

The annunciation in Luke's Gospel starts and ends with the words and actions of an angel. To be honest, I often gloss over this fact as I've never been particularly interested in angels. I skip television shows and movies featuring angels. I don't imagine them walking next to me or appearing at the Conference & Retreat Center for a short stay! But the Bible doesn't have my modern biases, and so we begin this third week of Advent with lessons learned from an angel.

These heavenly creatures serve as witnesses or heralds for God. Having listened to God in heaven, they announce God's message on earth. They are humble, selfless servants sent by God to speak life-changing words to God's people. As such, they witness powerfully to God's presence with us and God's purpose for us.

Mary's life takes a radical turn toward the unexpected, the impossible, and the angel Gabriel shares this news with her. He comforts her and calms her fears. He reassures her of God's plan. He answers her honest questions. He proclaims God's presence in and with her—a promise that will uphold her throughout her life right up to watching her son die on a cross. As a witness, Gabriel doesn't draw attention to himself. He comes. He speaks. Then he leaves.

Angels and humans have at least three things in common. (1) We are God's creatures. (2) We are God's witnesses. (3) We don't know to whom God will send us. This is why we end our worship services at Mount Olivet with a prayer for courage as we return to our homes, neighborhoods, schools, and jobs. With whom will you share the message of God's comforting presence this Advent? How will your actions witness to God's love for all?

— REV. DR. THERESA LATINI

Let us pray: You have called us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to share your love with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2023
GET CURIOUS

Mary felt baffled and disoriented when the angel Gabriel appeared before her (Luke 1:29). She likely had heard biblical stories about angels speaking to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others. Maybe she believed in the existence of angels, but I highly doubt she expected to encounter one herself. Why would a heavenly messenger visit her, a lowly young woman from an insignificant town in Galilee?! It must have seemed like an unnerving dream or a terrifying nightmare.

Yet Mary didn't run away in trepidation. She didn't dismiss or deny her experience. She didn't denigrate herself as unworthy. In the midst of great perplexity, Mary got curious. She listened. She asked questions. She pondered God's message to her. It made no sense, but she kept her heart open to its veracity. She reflected on Gabriel's words carefully, considered her own experience wisely, and accepted the unexpected.

Curiosity keeps our hearts and minds open to the unanticipated or even unimaginable. When we are curious, we pay attention to our experience in the present moment. We remember our finitude and limited understanding. We wonder and wait for clarity and insight from God. We accept ambiguity, uncertainty, and impermanence. We relinquish control of our circumstances. We ask poignant questions without demanding answers: Why did my life unspool in one direction and yours in another? Why did one friend heal from cancer and another succumb to it? Why does one career end in celebration and another in defeat?

God's ways aren't always obvious or understandable. We experience surprise, skepticism, and confusion in the life of faith. In moments like these, curiosity and authentic questioning keep our hearts open to God and one another. What questions are you pondering this Advent? How might you hear and hold others' questions with patience and wonder? – REV. DR. THERESA LATINI

*Let us pray: Wise and compassionate God, help us to ask questions and listen deeply whenever we are confused or surprised by life's unexpected turns. Let us be like Mary, who trusted in your goodness and your loving presence even in the midst of much unknowing.
Amen.*



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2023

ACT COURAGEOUSLY

Last year, my daughter and I read a beautifully written book, *Hound Dog True*, about a young girl coming of age in a new town surrounded by new friends and family. In one of the most memorable scenes, the school principal says to the young protagonist, “You can’t have brave without scared.” How true. Courage is born in the belly of fear.

Throughout the Bible, angels visit God’s people and immediately utter the words, “Don’t worry. Fear not.” Gabriel’s appearance before Mary is no different. He calms her beating heart and anxious mind by saying, “Be not afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” In so doing, he assures Mary that she is safe and cherished.

Surely Mary feels stunned, alarmed, or even panicked. Yet courage prevails. She stands firm when every cell in her body compels her to run and hide. She listens deeply and inquires boldly. She believes God’s words despite their obscurity. She leans into God’s plan even though it might cost her dearly.

Make no mistake, Mary’s life takes a drastic turn toward peril. She will become pregnant outside of wedlock. The risk of being ostracized or marginalized is very real but the least of her worries. If Joseph dismisses her, then she will lose home and food and any capacity to acquire them on her own. Her child will grow up destitute. She will be relegated to begging for their survival.

Mary had much to fear, yet she acted courageously. What enabled her to do so? Did she have a naïve disposition? Was she in shock? Or was her courage a sign of God’s grace already at work in her life? I suspect the latter. This Advent may we, too, lean into courage in the midst of fear and anxiety in our hearts and in our world.

— REV. DR. THERESA LATINI

Let us pray: Grant us courage to speak our truth honestly and follow your son, Jesus, fully this Advent season. If worry keeps us awake at night or anxiety courses through our veins by day, may we remember that we are held securely in your love, God. Amen.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2023

SAY YES

Have you ever watched the movie, “Yes Day?” Three kids convince their parents to say “yes” to any request for an entire day. The kids plan outrageous activities like eating a gigantic \$40 sundae in thirty minutes – the aftereffects are not pleasant – and going through a car wash with the windows down. All I could think was, “Who in their right mind would say ‘yes’ to that?” So, when my daughter asked if we could do a “yes day,” I promptly said, “No!” (with a smile).

Gabriel announces an absolutely ludicrous plan to Mary: she will give birth to King David’s heir, and she will become pregnant with this child through the Holy Spirit’s presence. Most of us would raise our eyebrows in disbelief or scoff at the absurdity of it all. But not Mary. She answers, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Mary proclaims a resounding “yes” to God’s plan for her life. This “yes” is many-layered. She says “yes” to hope in God. She says “yes” to bearing and loving a child who will be misunderstood, threatened, and killed unjustly. She says “yes” to living outside of her comfort zone and cultural acceptability. She says “yes” to participating in God’s suffering love. She allows her life to be reauthored by God.

Thankfully, none of us have been asked to consent to a day of destructive antics or to a virgin birth this Advent season! But we can say “yes” to connecting playfully with our children, grandchildren, and loved ones; to sharing our resources with those in need; to comforting those who are ill and dying; and to sitting still before God. How else might you say “yes” to God’s life and love this Advent season?

– REV. DR. THERESA LATINI

*Let us pray: God, grant us the grace to say “yes” by loving you and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Most of all, help us to hear the “yes” you’ve spoken to us in Jesus Christ.
May we rest in your love and acceptance of us just as we are. Amen.*



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2023

WITH GOD AND OTHERS

Sometimes the smallest words in a poem, a prayer, or a good story convey the greatest meaning. Prepositions are like that for me. They are seemingly insignificant yet they function like a bridge. Prepositions describe the relationship between two nouns. They tell us how people, places, and things are connected. They sometimes surprise us by linking disparate and disconnected ideas.

In Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel, the preposition "with" shows up four times. Gabriel says to Mary, "The Lord is *with you*" and "you have found favor *with God*" and "nothing will be impossible *with God*." Mary then replies daringly, "let it be *with me* according to your word."

At the heart of God's message to Mary (and to us) is this promise: I am with you always. You are not alone. Mary didn't know fully the suffering she would endure by virtue of her calling, but God knew. And God gave her a lifeline to hope, peace, and joy for the most trying moments: a reminder of God's unfailing presence.

Human existence is fundamentally co-existence. We belong with God, not without God. No action or inaction can sever our togetherness with God. Because, while we exist with God, we also exist with one another. God attaches us to each other in solidarity and love.

Gabriel tells Mary about her cousin Elizabeth, who also, against all odds, is pregnant. Like Mary, Elizabeth will suffer loss. She, too, is the talk of the town. She may not be disgraced in the same way as unwed Mary, but she is not perceived as normal. Thus, Gabriel encourages Mary, "Elizabeth will be with you in this journey. You are God's gifts to each other. Go and be together."

This Advent season may we find happiness in communion with God and with one another. May we relish our togetherness and experience one another as true gifts.

— REV. DR. THERESA LATINI

Let us pray: Thank you, God, for your unfailing presence with us. In our busyness, may we find comfort and joy in being present with one another and caring for one another.

Amen.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2023

JESUS DOES IT FOR US

Throughout this third week of Advent, our daily devotions have encouraged us to cultivate certain dispositions and make concrete choices: be a witness; get curious; act courageously; say “yes”; cling to God and others. It would be a mistake, however, to turn these into an Advent to-do list. We have enough of those already.

Gabriel assures Mary that God does the impossible for her. He explains, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Mary cannot bring any of this to pass, even if she tries. The same is true for you and me.

Many religious traditions emphasize human action more so than God’s grace. Their message sounds like this: “Do this. Don’t do that. Do better. Pray longer. Don’t waste your God-given talents . . . or else.” Living under these spiritual demands often leads to guilt and exhaustion.

Thankfully, this is the good news of the Gospel: God doesn’t expect us to do it all, because Jesus does it for us. *Jesus is the one true witness.* Through his life, death, and resurrection he teaches us that God is love. If we want to know who God is and what God does, then we need only to look at him.

Jesus demonstrates open-hearted curiosity to God’s will. As an adolescent, he spends days in the temple asking questions about God. As an adult, he prays and follows God wisely.

Jesus acts courageously for us. When our courage fails, his endures. *Jesus says the ultimate “yes” to God* when he dies on the cross, and in so doing, he says “yes” to you and me, and indeed all creation.

Jesus clings to God and us. He is God-with-us eternally. When we let go, he holds on, always and forever.

– REV. DR. THERESA LATINI

Let us pray: God of abounding love, awaken us to your abundant love and provision for us in your son, Jesus Christ. May we experience joy as we rest in you this Advent season, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.



Fourth Sunday of Advent & Christmas Communion

DECEMBER 17, 2023

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

LUKE 1:39-45

“SURROUNDED BY YOUR PEOPLE”



SCRIPTURE:

LUKE 1:39-45

“SURROUNDED BY YOUR PEOPLE”

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

In this final week of Advent, Luke's story moves to the hill country where cousins Elizabeth and Mary meet for the first time since their life-altering encounters with the angel Gabriel. As the birth of Jesus—God's coming home in human flesh—draws ever closer, we see just how important relationships are for navigating difficult and uncertain times. Both Mary and Elizabeth celebrate what has happened to each other and bless one another with their words and their presence. In this season we see just how powerful it can be to be surrounded by your people.

– PASTOR CIESLIK



MONDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2023

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

LUKE 1:39-40

For the last sixth months Elizabeth has been living in seclusion. Her husband Zechariah has likely been with her, but he's been unable to speak since his encounter with the angel Gabriel. So for all intents and purposes Elizabeth has been navigating the excitement and joy, the fear and anxiety surrounding what's about to happen to her, alone. For her part, Mary has had her world up ended by Gabriel's visit. Yes, she's received incredible promises, but she's also a young woman, vulnerable to all the ways that society will perceive what's about to transpire. It's a lot. It's easy to imagine that Mary would be at a loss for what to do next. But in Gabriel's words to Mary, there was one clue as to where she might go next: Elizabeth is pregnant too.

So Mary hurries to her cousin, bringing all of her feelings, the joy and the fear, with her. Maybe she needs confirmation that all of this is real. Maybe she's hoping it's all been a crazy dream. Most likely, Mary just wants to be with someone who knows her and is in a similar situation.

Amid uncertainty, it can be comforting to be with folks who know you, who know your story. When we enter periods of the unknown it can be helpful to be with those who've been there before. People, despite all our foibles and faults, are a tangible sign that we aren't alone in this life. We don't always have the right words for one another, but sometimes just being together is enough.

— PASTOR CIESLIK

God we give you thanks for the ways that you are at work in and through our relationships. We give thanks for the people who help us to see, however briefly, that you are with us. Bless our gatherings, our time with friends and families. Strengthen us to be signs of your presence for others. In Jesus' name, Amen.



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2023

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb.

LUKE 1:41a

Babies are busy. I have pretty distinct memories of laying on the couch next to my wife in the final weeks of her pregnancies and watching an arm or a leg or a rump push at the boundaries of the womb and then disappear again. It's beautiful and a little disconcerting all at the same time, and I was just a spectator; I can't even begin to imagine how that all feels. There is something quite ordinary about John jumping in Elizabeth's womb as he hears Mary's greeting. But there is also something unusual at work here. The gospel writer wants us to see this very ordinary occurrence, a child repositioning himself in his mother's womb, as confirmation of the angel's extraordinary promises. It is almost as if Luke is conditioning us to be on the lookout for the inconceivable love of God in all the regular, ordinary stuff of human existence. So, while this is just a baby thrashing about, it is also John the Baptist, the one who will point to and participate in revealing Jesus as God's son and savior of the world.

– PASTOR CIESLIK

God, thanks for the ordinary, routine moments in this life. Give us a holy imagination so that we might right perceive and receive all the good you are doing in our midst. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2023

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit...

LUKE 1:41b

We might be tempted to push past these few words to get on with the story, but Luke's gospel is making an enormous claim here. Elizabeth is about to say something big, and she's not just doing it on her own. This older woman, whom much of society had likely written off as being irrelevant, has been filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth has within her the potency and the presence of God. The words she's about to speak carry with them the authority of God. This is one of the beautiful peculiarities of Luke's gospel: God works through the people society doesn't expect. Women. The marginalized. The disenfranchised. These are the people for whom Jesus especially comes. These are the kinds of people whom Jesus empowers to be bearers of God's good news.

Self-doubt is a powerful force in many of our lives. We might think who am I to do this, or to speak up, or enter this place? But in baptism we are anointed with the gift of the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. So we, like Elizabeth, carry within us the power and presence of God. God has decided to work in and through us for good in this world. Take heart, have courage, you are called to be a bearer of God's light and love in this world.

– PASTOR CIESLIK

God, help us to trust in the Spirit's presence in our lives, help us move in this world with confidence and humility trusting that you are always with us. Amen.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2023

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'

LUKE 1:41-42

It makes all the sense in the world that we would fasten our attention on anything in the biblical witness that points to or hints at Jesus. He is, after all, God's good news of great joy for all people. But what I love about these two verses is that Elizabeth reminds Mary that she is firstly a recipient of God's blessing. Mary is not only the bearer of God, the theotokos in the Orthodox tradition, she is an important woman of faith in her own right. She has an identity all her own and Elizabeth sees that, names that, and celebrates that.

Sometimes there are moments in our life that can make us feel one dimensional. Like I'm only my career, or I'm only a parent, or I'm only a person with this disease or this condition. However, there are folks in our lives who can remind us that we are so much more. It's one of the things I love about this community of faith, that it relentlessly reminds me that I am a beloved child of God first, and then all of the other roles that I occupy in life are outgrowths of that belovedness.

– PASTOR CIESLIK

God thank you that you see us, love us and call us your own. Thank you for our Mount Olivet family that helps us to remember that we are blessed by, and loved by, God. Amen.



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2023

And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy.

LUKE 1:43-44

Recently, my family was able to spend some wonderful time with my sister's family. It was the first time that we were able to meet my nephew. We were all excited for this time, but no one was more excited than my son. He loves babies and toddlers. Over the course of our trip we got to spend time with family and friends, we had good meals, and had fun on the beach. It was a full trip with lots of excitement. As we were heading home, we asked everyone what their favorite part of the trip was, and my son's highlight was meeting his cousin.

Throughout this week's passage there have been big theological claims and beautiful ways that God has been at work in surprising ways, but at its most basic, this is a story about family finding joy and beauty in being together. It's a story of delighting in the ways their family is growing. It's two women loving each other and recognizing the power they have to be forces for good in the world. Family isn't always easy. It can at times be incredibly difficult. But as we rush to put the final touches on our Christmas season, remember that sometimes the best gift is the time we have surrounded by our people.

– PASTOR CIESLIK

God, thanks for the ways our family, chosen or given, fill us with deep joy. Thanks for the ways they help us to remember what is most important. Amen.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2023

*And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was
spoken to her by the Lord.'*

LUKE 1:45

I would have to believe that both Elizabeth and Mary had moments of uncertainty, if not downright disbelief. Is this really happening? To both of us? Which is why I find this verse to be so tender and potent. In the midst of all that is happening to these two women, Elizabeth blesses Mary, and not just Mary for being Mary which is cool enough, but she blesses Mary for her willingness to trust and believe in God's promises. Elizabeth blesses Mary for her patience, her openness, her willingness to live guided by faith. Maybe it's because Elizabeth is a few months ahead of Mary in this whole process, maybe it's because she experienced more of life on this planet, but there's something within her that senses that maybe Mary needs this right now. So she boldly offers blessing and encouragement, trusting that God will be faithful to God's promises.

We're not as familiar with offering blessings in today's world. We're afraid to offer them and aren't quite sure how to receive them. But if we risk the awkwardness, they can be an incredible gift to offer those we love. They can be just the words of comfort and encouragement that people need to be able to do the hard things in this life. When I was a kid, my grandma would send me cards and would often close them with a blessing; she would call and before hanging up would say, "God be with you." It felt weird sometimes, but it was also deeply comforting to know that someone was praying for me and reminding me that God was always with me.

— PASTOR CIESLIK

*God we give you thanks for the people in our lives who offer us your blessings, who help us
to trust anew your promises and your presence in our lives. Amen.*



Christmas Eve *Morning Worship*

DECEMBER 24, 2023

WORSHIP:
MPLS: 10AM
WEST: 10AM

SCRIPTURE:
LUKE 1:46-56
"THE GIFT IS GIVEN"



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2023

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

LUKE 2:1-7

We've been focusing on "coming home for Christmas" this Advent season. The irony of that theme is that Mary and Joseph, who take center stage in the Christmas story that we will read this evening, are so incredibly far from home as this story unfolds. They have journeyed more than ninety miles from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem to participate in the census ordered by the emperor. Not by car or even caravan, but by foot, while Mary is close to giving birth. And now, with no room in the inn, and no family to offer comfort, they take shelter in a barn, with only animals to keep them company, as Mary gives birth to their firstborn. Far from home, indeed. But perhaps this is only fitting, as we dare to believe that in the Incarnation, almighty and eternal God takes on our mortal flesh, joins us in our vulnerability, and comes into our world and calls it home—so that whatever happens to us, wherever we may go, at those moments when we feel far from home or alienated from those we love, we know that, in Jesus, God is with us. Always.

— PASTOR LOSE



Join Us!

CHRISTMAS EVE WORSHIP SERVICES

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24

2-10pm, Mpls Campus

1:30pm: Special Christmas Eve Instrumental Concert*

2, 3, & 4pm: Cathedral Choir and Orchestra

5 & 6pm: Instrumental Solo and Vocal Duet with Orchestra

7, 8, & 9pm: Senior Choir and Orchestra

10pm: Candlelight service with Senior Choir and Orchestra

Livestreamed hourly at mtolivet.org

**Thanks to the generous donation from a Mount Olivet family, we are pleased to offer this special musical program.*

2-6pm, West Campus

2 & 3pm: Cathedral Choir, String Quartet, and Harp

4 & 5pm: Senior Choir, String Quartet, and Harp

6pm: Candlelight service with Senior Choir, String Quartet, and Harp

CHRISTMAS DAY WORSHIP SERVICE

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25

Mpls Campus, 10am



MONDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2023

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

JOHN 1:1-5

Light. Nothing can live without it. And so it is the first Word God speaks, the first act of creation: “Let there be light!” And when we chose darkness over the light, God did not give up on us but created again; actually, re-created us and all things in and through Jesus. “A light to enlighten the Gentiles,” old Simeon sings. “A light that shines on in the darkness,” John declares, and then adds, so we don’t forget, “a light no darkness can overcome.” Today is a day of light, as many of us gather with family, surrounded by presents recently opened, filled with Christmas treats, grateful for what has been, and filled with hopes for a new and better year ahead. But make no mistake, in the days and weeks to come, there will be moments of darkness, of struggle, of doubt and more. When that happens, the Christmas promise remains: that Jesus is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome, the light and love that will guide and lead us, hold onto us, and in time bring us once again into God’s warm embrace. Thanks be to God!

– PASTOR LOSE



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