

ADAM HAMILTON

Author of *Creed*, *The Walk*, and *The Journey*



PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE LORD

ADVENT

AND THE MESSAGE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

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FOR THE LORD

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Cover Image: Piero della Francesca (1415-1492), *The Baptism of Christ*, after 1437, egg on poplar, 167 × 116 cm, National Gallery, London, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/piero-della-francesca-the-baptism-of-christ>. John's baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan is the pivotal moment when the lives of Jesus and his cousin John intersect. The scene is bathed in light from above, with light, pastel colors, and shadows that create depth. Italian Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca is known for his use of geometry and perspective, which he uses here to highlight the figure of Jesus.

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To LaVon,
on our fortieth wedding anniversary.
I love you so very much and
am deeply grateful for your friendship,
partnership, and love.*

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INTRODUCTION

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

The voice of one shouting in the wilderness,
“Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.”

Matthew 3:1-3

“Hurry!” LaVon shouted, as I was searching for the keys to my car. Contractions were getting closer, and it was time to head to the hospital. We’d spent months preparing for the birth of our daughter. We’d decorated the nursery, assembled a crib and changing table, and, with the help of friends and family, gathered diapers, clothes, and everything else she could possibly need. We’d also spent months preparing

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ourselves emotionally, praying and reading about how to be a parent. As the pregnancy progressed, excitement, anticipation, and not a little anxiety filled the air. Once at the hospital, we had more contractions for LaVon and more waiting for us both. And while the waiting seemed interminable at times, our daughter was finally born, and our world was forever changed.¹

The preparation, waiting, and anticipation of childbirth is an apt metaphor for the season of Advent. The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus*, which means coming, arrival, or presence. Advent, the liturgical season, starts four Sundays before Christmas and can be as long as twenty-eight days and as short as twenty-two. If you could summarize the aim of Advent, it would be captured by the words of Isaiah, words that defined John the Baptist's work and mission: "Prepare the way of the Lord" (Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4 NRSV).

We often think of Advent as a season to prepare to celebrate anew the birth of Jesus—his first advent—but it is more than that. Advent is also focused on preparing for Christ's return—his second advent—either at his Second Coming at the climax of human history, or when he returns for us at our death. The prayer in the United Methodist "Service of Death and Resurrection" captures the aim of Advent's focus as it relates to Christ's return:

Help us to live as those who are prepared to die.
And when our days here are accomplished,
enable us to die as those who go forth to live,
so that living or dying, our life may be in you,
and that nothing in life or in death will be
able to separate us from your great love in
Christ Jesus our Lord.²

Advent calls us to prepare the way of the Lord in our lives and in our world.

**Advent calls us to prepare
the way of the Lord in our
lives and in our world.**

Jesus speaks on several occasions about his second advent. The letters of the New Testament mention his return again and again. As Jesus spoke of his second coming, he challenged his hearers with words like these: “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (Matthew 24:44; Luke 12:40). In Matthew 25 he illustrates this point with the parable of the ten bridesmaids, the parable of the talents, and the parable of the sheep and

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the goats, all of which describe some who were found ready and some who were not when the bridegroom, the master, or the king returns. The consequences were tragic for those who were not prepared.

My life as a pastor is filled with constant reminders of just how suddenly and unexpectedly death can come for us. In the month I completed this manuscript, I sat with two different families whose young adult daughters died unexpectedly and another family whose father died unexpectedly. It is true, Advent is about rightly celebrating Christmas, but it is also about knowing that Christ will one day return and living in such a way that we are found ready on that day. Doing so allows us to live as people of hope.

Advent and John the Baptist

This book is a series of reflections on the life of John the Baptist and, for many, it will be an Advent study. What does John the Baptist have to do with Advent? And why are two of Advent's four Sundays dedicated to the telling of John's story, his ministry and his message? Because John's mission, like Advent's mission, was to "prepare the way of the Lord." No other figure in scripture is more closely associated with this idea of preparation, of making people ready for the coming of Christ, than John the Baptist.

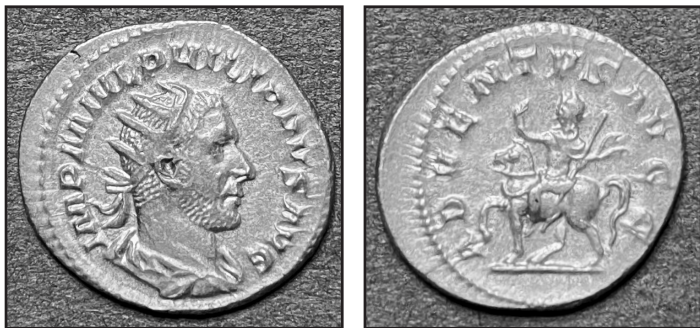
A little history is helpful when seeing John's connection to Advent. In the ancient world, when rulers announced their plans to leave their capital to make official visits to other regions of their kingdom, the people prepared for their coming. Such visits were, in the Roman Empire, described as the *adventus* of the visiting ruler. This was particularly true of a visit from the emperor. There were *adventus* ceremonies to formally receive the emperor when he arrived and *adventus* celebrations in the capital when he returned. Notre Dame historian Sabine MacCormack described what is known from Hellenistic sources of these *adventus* events:

When the arrival of a ruler in a city was announced ahead of time, the citizens would decorate their city, and on the appointed day, a procession of citizens, headed by their dignitaries, would go out to a certain point outside the city walls, where they would meet the ruler... Those in the procession would carry flowers, olive or palm-branches, lights and incense... Singing and acclamations [ensued].³

This kind of welcome for a ruler was not original to the Romans. Most ancient cultures had such practices. MacCormack's description even helps us understand what was happening on Palm Sunday when Jesus entered Jerusalem. The Romans even, at times, minted coins to

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celebrate the arrival, or return, of the emperor. Below is an example of a coin from the time of Emperor Philip I, who reigned from AD 244–249. The emperor sits upon a horse, hand upraised, greeting the people. Above him are the words, *ADVENTUS AUGG*—Aug, short for Augustus, a title that here identified the rider with the emperor.



Roman coin showing Emperor Philip I. “ADVENTUS AUGG” appears above him in the image on the right.

Now, here’s the point we cannot miss. Before the arrival of the emperor, pharaoh, king, or queen, often months ahead of time, *a messenger was sent to prepare the way* for the monarch’s arrival, to make sure that the people and their leaders were ready for his or her coming. John the Baptist was that messenger sent by God to prepare the people for the arrival of the long-awaited messianic king. This is why each of the four Gospels begins with John the Baptist before turning to Jesus’s public ministry. Matthew 3:1-3 records:

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, "Change your hearts and lives! [Repent!] Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

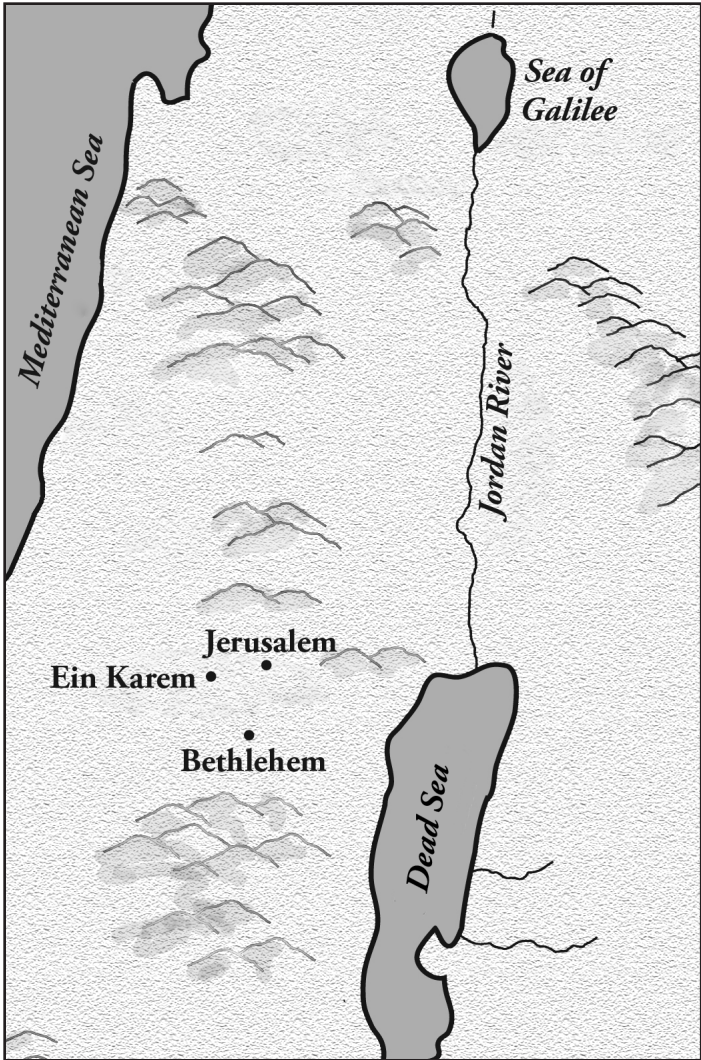
The voice of one shouting in the wilderness,
"Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight."

John was sent by God to prepare the people for the coming of Christ. In this book we'll examine his life, ministry, and message so that we might, in our own lives, "prepare the way for the Lord."

Lord, as I begin this study of the life and ministry of John the Baptist, I pray that you will speak to me. Help me to know this remarkable prophet in ways I had not before. Help me to hear your word to me through John's story, his preaching and witness, so that I might appropriately celebrate your birth anew, and be prepared for the day I meet you face to face.

1

THE
ANNUNCIATION:
“GOD HAS HEARD
YOUR PRAYERS”





1



THE ANNUNCIATION: “GOD HAS HEARD YOUR PRAYERS”

*I am sending my messenger, who will prepare the way
before me.*

Malachi 3:1 (NRSV)

During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old. One day Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. Following the customs of

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priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense. All the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering. An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John."

Luke 1:5-13

We begin our study of the life and message of John the Baptist where his story begins in Luke's Gospel, with an older couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth.

The year was 5 BC. Herod the Great, with the support of the Romans, ruled as king over Judea. At 67, Herod had become increasingly paranoid, and his health was in decline. Many anticipated his death, and some hoped this was the time that God would raise up a king from the line of David, a king who would rule with righteousness and justice. Some wondered if this would be the time when the prophetic message of Zechariah, written a half a millennium earlier, might be fulfilled:

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion.

Sing aloud, Daughter Jerusalem.

Look, your king will come to you.

He is righteous and victorious.

The Annunciation: “God Has Heard Your Prayers”

*He is humble and riding on an ass,
on a colt, the offspring of a donkey.
(Zechariah 9:9)*

Zechariah, the father of John, likely named for that earlier prophet, was among those who hoped that a righteous and victorious ruler would soon come.

Zechariah was a priest of the division of Abijah. A thousand years earlier, according to 1 Chronicles, King David had divided the priests into twenty-four divisions. All of the divisions would serve together for the yearly festivals such as Passover, when Jerusalem’s streets would be filled with crowds. In addition, each division would be assigned duties at the Temple two weeks out of the year. When not serving at the Temple, priests could live wherever they wished, and likely wherever they lived they served as something like a parish priest for their community, teaching, offering pastoral care, and praying for the sick. Elizabeth was a “descendent of Aaron,” which likely means that she was, herself, the daughter of a priest.

Luke tells us that they lived in “a city in the Judean highlands” (Luke 1:39). Jerusalem is surrounded by hill country. While Luke provides no more detail, the tradition of the church is that they lived in a village today called Ein Karem, about four miles from Jerusalem’s Temple. (See the map at the beginning of this chapter.) There are two

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The traditional site of the birthplace of John the Baptist, in a grotto beneath The Church of Saint John the Baptist in Ein Karem.

well-known churches in Ein Karem that celebrate John the Baptist's story. One purports to be built atop the ancient well where Elizabeth would have drawn water. The other is built over a grotto said to be where John the Baptist was born. Whether or not this is Elizabeth and Zechariah's village, or whether these churches mark the actual places water was drawn and John was born, we cannot know. But the churches there beautifully help pilgrims remember the story of John's conception and birth.

With this as a backdrop, let's explore in more detail Luke's telling of the story of John's parents and the

annunciation to them that they would conceive and bear a son whom they were to call John.

Elizabeth and Zechariah's Infertility

Luke begins the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah by writing, "They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old" (Luke 1:6-7). These two sentences summarize both a lifetime of faithfulness and a long journey of sorrow and disappointment.

While today, there are an increasing number of adults of childbearing age choosing not to have children,¹ this was not the case in the biblical world. In the ancient world, everyone was expected to have offspring. In addition to the emotional desire to have children, there was an economic importance as children assisted with work and, as parents grew older, adult children cared for their aging parents.

But then, as today, there were couples who struggled with infertility. The Mayo Clinic reports that between 10 and 15 percent of couples who wish to conceive are unable to do so in any given year.² We don't know if the number was higher or lower in biblical times, but there are multiple

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couples in scripture, like Elizabeth and Zechariah, who went years without being able to have children.

In the biblical world, the physical causes of infertility were not understood, leaving many to believe that God was the one who opened or closed a woman's womb. At times in scripture, childlessness or barrenness were seen as punishments from God. Some Christians still believe that today—seeing their own infertility as God's will, or even God's punishment. But many do not see infertility this way.

Doctors have discovered dozens of physiological reasons why a woman might not be able to conceive, or why a man's sperm count might be too low to ensure conception. And researchers have found ways to treat infertility. I don't believe God afflicts women or men with the conditions that prevent conception or carrying a child to term, any more than I believe God makes his children sick with cancer or intentionally infects us with COVID-19.

Women and men in scripture, as today, felt deep disappointment, grief, and pain in infertility. I have been with many families over the years who knew this kind of pain, and often a profound disappointment with God, because of their inability to conceive. This is true even when we understand the underlying physiological factors involved in infertility.

The Annunciation: “God Has Heard Your Prayers”

For those who have struggled with infertility, notice Luke’s description of Elizabeth and Zechariah: “They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord’s commandments and regulations.” Their infertility was not because of sin. It was not because God did not love them or that God was displeased with them. Luke simply says that “Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant.” It would appear that there was a physiological reason for Elizabeth’s infertility, something affecting her or Zechariah, that kept them from having a child.

“Your Prayers Have Been Heard”

Luke continues:

One day Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. Following the customs of priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord’s sanctuary and burn incense. All the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering.

(Luke 1:8-10)

As we learned above, each division of priests, in addition to serving during the festivals, was assigned two weeks out of the year to serve at the Temple performing a variety of functions. Still, it was only a handful of priests each day that were selected to enter the Holy Place, the sanctuary

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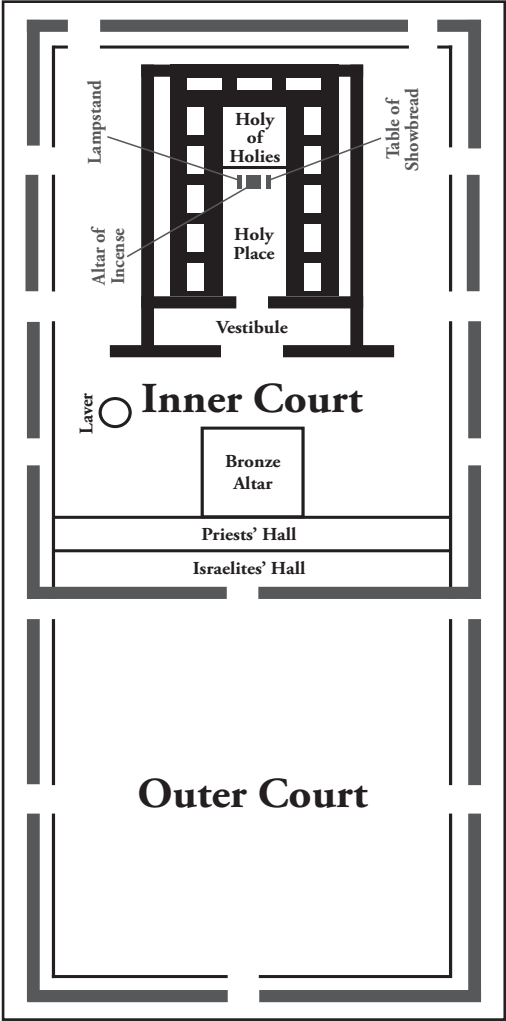


Diagram of the Temple



A scale model of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem.

of the Temple. With thousands of priests, the chance of entering the sanctuary to offer incense, bring in the bread offering, or fill the lampstands with oil might happen once in a priest's lifetime.

On this day, Zechariah was chosen to burn incense in the Temple. Shafts of light shown through the smoke of the incense from the clerestory windows high above the sanctuary floor. Oil lamps burned in the golden lampstand illuminating the beauty of this space. The walls were covered with carvings of winged creatures, palm trees, and blossoming flowers. Zechariah undoubtedly tried to take it

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all in as he approached the gold altar on which he was to burn the incense. It sat just before the entrance to the Holy of Holies, God's throne room. Just then, Luke tells us, "An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear" (Luke 1:11-12).

**Most of the angels we meet in
scripture are not winged beings,
but look like ordinary people.**

The word *angel*, in Greek, literally means messenger, and most of the angels we meet in scripture are not winged beings, but look like ordinary people. This is why the writer of Hebrews tells his readers to welcome strangers because in so doing they may be welcoming angels without knowing it (Hebrews 13:2 NRSV). Nevertheless, Zechariah was overcome with fear and must have recognized this stranger was no mere mortal. But it was the words of Gabriel, not his appearance, that would leave Zechariah speechless. "The angel said, 'Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John'" (Luke 1:13).

The Annunciation: "God Has Heard Your Prayers"

Zechariah couldn't believe his ears. "Your prayers have been heard... Elizabeth will give birth to your son." Zechariah and Elizabeth had been married for decades. For years he must have prayed, again and again, that Elizabeth would conceive and bear a child. How many tears had been shed by Elizabeth when she had been unable to conceive? At their advanced age, it was likely Zechariah had stopped praying that prayer years before.

I wonder if there are things you have prayed for a long time, for years, but have seen no answer? I have recently begun seeing what looks like the answer to a prayer I've prayed almost daily for thirty-one years. At times I'd stopped praying about this, wondering if my prayers for it really mattered. On many occasions, I'd told the person I'd been praying for about my prayer for her. Recently she told me, "That prayer you've been praying for me—I didn't think what you'd prayed for was even possible. But now, I feel like the very thing you asked for is what I'm experiencing." Our prayers are always heard, even if we don't see the results we're looking for or they don't come in the time frame we hope.

When it comes to prayer, it is important to understand how prayer "works." Prayer is primarily about communion with God, giving thanks, offering praise, placing our life in God's hands, inviting God to lead and guide us, to forgive

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us, and to use us. Prayer, like our conversations with friends or family, is not primarily about asking for things. It is not our effort to advise God on how to run the universe. And prayer is more about connecting with God and drawing strength, grace, and guidance from our faith, than it is about God solving all of our problems and removing all of our pain.

I've taught our congregation that it's okay to pray for the "grand-slam, out-of-the-park" kind of miracles. But it's important to recognize that God's primary way of working in our world is not to suspend the laws of nature to answer our prayers through miraculous intervention. We lay before God the desires of our hearts—health, healing, children, jobs, a mate—and we recognize that God's primary way of working is through the laws God has established, through the care of others, and through the strength and guidance God gives by the Spirit.

I was speaking with a woman recently whose husband was battling stage four cancer. One day he was fine, the next day he was in the hospital battling for his life. I loved how this woman articulated her faith. She said to me, "I don't see God as a genie in a bottle granting me three wishes. I prayed for healing, but I also prayed, 'God, we can't face this mountain without you. Please just hold my hand, that I can know you are with me, with us, and that you'll help us through this, whatever happens.'"

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Several weeks later her husband died, but not before we gathered around his bedside to talk about faith, about God's love and grace, and about the significance of the resurrection of Christ. We spoke about Christ's promise to prepare a place for us and what heaven might be like. Then, with his wife and children holding his hands, touching him tenderly, I anointed his head with oil, and we committed his heart and life to Christ. His wife felt that Christ had taken her hand, and his hand, sustaining them and carrying them even through the "valley of the shadow of death."

If God's ordinary way of working was to produce miracles when people simply pray hard enough, or pray just the right words, or when enough people pray, we would not need doctors. No one would ever remain sick, be infertile, die young, lose their jobs, or have a bad day. We'd pray, and God would immediately fix things. That way of thinking about prayer, as my parishioner shared, makes God the genie in our bottle. But that is not what we find in scripture or in our lives. When we pray, we do so in relationship with God. We come in prayer to draw strength from God. We are not asking to be delivered from the realities of the human experience, but to invite God to walk with us as our companion, our deliverer, our Lord. I think of Thomas Dorsey's classic gospel prayer, "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand..." or the

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well-known hymn, “What a friend we have in Jesus...” Both point to the power of God’s presence with us in the midst of adversity or pain.

That’s not to say that God cannot bring about the out-of-the-park-home-run miracles. I continue to pray for them, even as I understand they are not the norm. God is never offended by our honestly sharing our hopes and desires. And the story of John’s conception is an example of God’s miraculous intervention. But notice that this miracle occurs not when Zechariah and Elizabeth are in their twenties and praying so fervently for a child. It happens decades later, when God’s unfolding plan *needs* a messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah. Yet, when God looked for a woman to bear this messenger, God remembered the prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth and chose them for this important role in God’s redemptive plans.

This theme of infertility and God’s intervention at unexpected times in order to fulfill God’s greater purposes shows up again and again in scripture. Sarah and Abraham struggled with infertility, but it wasn’t until they were ninety and one hundred years old that they had their son, Isaac. Isaac and Rebekah were unable to conceive, but when Isaac was nearly sixty Rebekah had twins, Jacob and Esau. Jacob’s wife Rachel could not conceive, but finally, after much grief, she conceived and gave birth to Joseph

The Annunciation: “God Has Heard Your Prayers”

(of the *Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* fame!). There would be no Jewish people were it not for God’s compassionate intervention in the lives of these couples.

Add to the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel the story of Manoah and his wife who, again by a miracle, conceived and brought the great warrior Samson into this world. Then there is the story of Hannah and Elkanah in 1 Samuel and their conception of the prophet Samuel. Their story, and Hannah’s faith, shaped Luke’s telling of both Elizabeth’s and Mary’s stories in his Gospel. Though the author of 1 Samuel assumed God had shut Hannah’s womb, he noted God’s mercy in allowing Hannah to conceive after years of infertility. As a result, she dedicated her son, Samuel, to God and, from that time on, Samuel was raised by Eli the priest. We’ll see in chapter 3 that something similar may have happened with John the Baptist. In 1 Samuel 2, Hannah sang a song of praise to God, a song that became the pattern for Mary’s own Magnificat we’ll study in chapter 2. And, like John the Baptist, Hannah and Elkanah’s son, Samuel, became a great prophet of God.

These stories teach us that infertility was a real issue among God’s people in the Bible, that there was pain for these families who struggled with it, that God heard their prayers but did not miraculously intervene at the time they prayed, and that God had compassion for those who struggled with infertility.

Thank God for Unanswered Prayers?

I love Garth Brooks's song, "Unanswered Prayers." In it, the singer describes going to a hometown football game with his wife, only to run into his old high school flame. He remembers how, each night back in high school, he prayed that "God would make her mine." But as he reflected on his life since then, his marriage and family, he thanked God that God had not answered his high school prayers.

You may have had a flame you thought would be "the one." I did. But after she broke up with me and broke my heart, I fell in love with my best friend, a girl in my youth group named LaVon. We recently celebrated our fortieth anniversary together. Like the song says, I thank God for unanswered prayers.

I've also noted in my life that most of the painful things I've ever experienced, the things I wished God would have miraculously taken away, are the very things that most profoundly shaped my life and made me who I am today. That's true for most people I've spoken with who experienced hardship.

There's a man in the church I serve named Eddie Connor. He lost his wife and two little girls, to cancer. He doesn't believe that God gave his wife and children cancer.

The Annunciation: "God Has Heard Your Prayers"

There was a rare genetic condition that neither he nor his wife knew they shared. Two of their four children ended up having the condition, leading to a cancer that is nearly always fatal. Of course, they prayed for healing for their children, and Eddie prayed the same for his wife. But he also understood that God's usual way of working is through people. Eddie also believed God was walking with him and his family through this dark valley.

He described for me a moment when he felt like he could not go on anymore. He was standing at a gas station, and he cried out, "God, I can't do this without you." In that moment he felt the Holy Spirit come over him. He heard God assure him that his wife and daughters would be safe with him, and that Eddie himself was going to be okay. He told me of the sorrow and pain he endured, and the hope his faith gave him, the strength he found from God that carried him.

Eddie also told me how, like Job enduring suffering and loss, he felt God had heard his prayers, had carried him and his surviving children, and ultimately allowed him to meet the woman that would become his second wife, a woman who had, herself, known pain before they met. Together they each found joy once again.

God heard Elizabeth's and Zechariah's prayers all through the years. And God was no doubt moved by

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their prayers. God walked with them, cared for them, and redeemed their pain, and surprised them in the end, in a way they would never have expected and for purposes they could not have imagined. And God does the same with us.

One last story and we'll move on to the final points in this chapter.

A couple at Church of the Resurrection lost four children to miscarriage. Eventually, they had two successful pregnancies and brought two children into the world. But the couple couldn't shake the feeling that God wanted them to care for foster children as well as their own. They had never met a foster child or foster family before. They took steps and met with a child, but after careful prayer and consideration decided not to bring another child under their roof.

The couple met with a second child and then a third. They began to get the message that this was something God wanted them to do, and they decided to follow God. The couple went through training and, several years ago, they began accepting foster care placements with little children. Since then, they have provided a home for thirty children ranging in age from eight months to three years. In 2017, when they heard that the Kansas Department of Children and Families had teenagers sleeping on the floor of their

offices because they lacked placements for all these kids, they decided to do something more.

They called the organization that places kids in Kansas and said they would take in any of these teens at night for whom the department lacked proper accommodations. Soon, this ministry became the focus of their evening work. At last count, in addition to the thirty foster children they have cared for, they have welcomed seven hundred different teens into their home as overnight guests, providing them with a hot meal, a warm bed, a shower, and clean clothes.

This couple eventually bought a home to serve as a group home for teenage girls. This vision started in their hearts when they were enduring miscarriages and feeling the pain of their inability to have children. Out of that loss, they became the answer to the prayers of hundreds of children and teenagers.

The miracles God works sometimes come in ways that are different from what we had imagined when we pray. In this case, there were children praying for a home, and a husband and wife who prayed for a way to make a difference for children. And God answered both of their prayers. As the prophet Malachi had foreseen, God found a way to turn the hearts of adults toward children, and the hearts of children toward adults.

**God hears our prayers, though
God's way of answering them
is often different than we
sometimes prayed.**

All of which is to say that while God isn't closing wombs, or bringing about miscarriages, God has a way of redeeming our pain and forcing good to come from it. God hears our prayers, though God's way of answering them is often different than we sometimes prayed, holding us, walking with us through the pain, and redeeming it in surprising ways.

God Often Chooses and Uses the "Very Old"

There is one last point to be observed from the story of the annunciation and conception of John. It has to do with the age of Elizabeth and Zechariah. I love that as Luke tells this story about them, he tells us that they were "very old." This kind of language would be frowned upon if Luke were writing for the *Washington Post* or *New York Times* today.

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The phrase seems a bit insulting. However, it was not meant to be insulting, but to teach something about how God works.

We're not sure how old "very old" was to Luke. In the Bible there is only one time that I can recall that we know the age of someone called "very old." It is in 2 Samuel 19:32, where we read, "Barzillai was very old, 80 years of age." Barzillai had lent his support to King David earlier, but now says that at his age he will be a burden to the king and implies he is nearing death (2 Samuel 19:34-37). In the Jewish Mishna, in a section called "Pirkei Avot" it appears that old age starts at sixty. The Mishnah instructs people to stand to honor someone who is sixty years old or older. As someone quickly approaching sixty, I appreciate the honor given to people at that age, but I'm not ready to accept the moniker of old.

Whatever the age of Elizabeth and Zechariah, the point Luke makes here is a point made throughout scripture, that God often chooses and uses older adults to do God's greatest work. Abraham was seventy-five when God called him to the Promised Land and promised to create a nation through him. Years later, Abraham's wife, Sarah, was ninety when she gave birth to Isaac. Moses was eighty when God called him to lead the Israelite slaves out of captivity. The Bible doesn't know of retirement for anyone except the Levites

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who carried the Tent of Meeting from place to place. They were to retire at age fifty, but could continue to serve in other ways (Numbers 8:25-26).

In our story today we find God choosing and using an older couple to be a part of his saving plans. Zechariah was surely over fifty, and priests were also Levites, so Zechariah could have been retired, but he chose not to retire. He continued to serve. And while continuing to serve, offering the incense in the Temple, God called him to his greatest adventure yet, to be the father of the prophet who would prepare the way for the Lord.

And even if Zechariah had retired, God's calling doesn't end when we retire; it may be just beginning. Perhaps you are already retired, or you've begun planning or thinking about it. Retirement does not mean an end to God calling you or working in and through you. If your congregation is like mine, you have many people approaching retirement or who are already retired. That represents a *huge opportunity* and an amazing resource of people who have time, wisdom, and life experience waiting to be called and unleashed in ministry.

Several years ago, I met with Pam, at the time recently divorced, and someone who had moved back to Kansas City for a new start. As she began this new chapter in her life, she also felt called to engage in a new mission: to open a

home for men and women in recovery or reentering society after time in prison.

Now, Pam runs two homes that provide thirteen people with a warm bed, three meals a day, and a chance at a future with hope. Did I mention that she's in her mid-sixties, likely the age that Zechariah and Elizabeth were when God told them they were receiving both a blessing and a mission? She wasn't trained in this work, but she wasn't too old for it. She felt God calling and said yes.

As Pam and I spoke, she told me her life story. There had been pain and disappointment and heartbreak, just as there had been in the lives of Elizabeth and Zechariah. But she said, "Today, I can look and see how God has used every piece of this to make me who I am today, and to prepare me to do what I'm doing now." There was a joy and light in her eyes as we parted. As she began anew, God gave her a new purpose: to help others begin anew.

Often it is the people who are retired, or older adults, who are most available to God. They have the time, experience, wisdom, passion, and a faith that leads them to say, "Here I am, send me." When I look at the leaders of the church I serve, the choir members, the ushers and greeters, those who serve older adults, those who pack weekend snack packs for hungry children, those who pick up furniture to share in our furnishing ministry for people

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coming out of homelessness, so many of them are over fifty. And whether you are sixteen or sixty, the point is that we never retire from God's work and that it is in the work that we do to serve God and care for others where we find our greatest joy.

A People Prepared for the Lord

I'd like to end this chapter looking at what Gabriel told Zechariah about the child Elizabeth would bear and his role in God's purposes and plan. In Luke 1:15c-17 we read Gabriel's words about John:

"He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (emphasis added).

We learned in the introduction that when rulers planned to journey to visit cities in their realms, they would send heralds or messengers ahead of them. The aim of these messengers was to ready the people for the monarch's visit. Nearly every ancient culture practiced something like this. Modern heads of state do the same when visiting other cities under their domain.

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Malachi, the final book of the Christian Old Testament, repeatedly promised that the Lord would be coming to Jerusalem, to his Temple, and that on that day both judgment and mercy would be meted out. In Malachi 3:1 God says to the people, "Look, I am sending my messenger who will clear the path before me; suddenly the LORD whom you are seeking will come to his temple." While standing in the Temple, Gabriel said, in essence, "Zechariah, your son will be that messenger."

In Malachi 4:1, God says to his people:

Look, the day is coming,

burning like an oven.

*All the arrogant ones and all those doing evil will become
straw.*

The coming day will burn them,

says the LORD of heavenly forces,

leaving them neither root nor branch.

Judgment is coming to the arrogant, those who do evil, and those who don't revere God, Malachi promises. But for those who repent, those who revere God's name and seek to do God's will, there will be blessings:

The sun of righteousness will rise on those revering my name;

healing will be in its wings

*so that you will go forth and jump about like
calves in the stall.*

(Malachi 4:2)

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Judgment and mercy were promised by God through Malachi. A burning oven to destroy, and the warmth of sunshine, healing, and joy to those who revere God's name. But before this day of the Lord's advent, a messenger would come to prepare God's people, to call them to repent and turn to God so that on that day, they might find "healing in its wings" rather than a burning oven.

In case Zechariah still did not understand the role his son was to play, Gabriel makes it even more clear by citing the final words of Malachi,³

*Look, I am sending Elijah the prophet to you,
before the great and terrifying day of the LORD arrives.
Turn the hearts of the parents to the children
and the hearts of the children to their parents.*
(Malachi 4:5-6)

In the light of these closing words of Malachi, listen again to the words of Gabriel to Zechariah in the Temple that day, "[Your son, John] will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of *Elijah*. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. *He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord*" (Luke 1:17, emphasis added).

To this day, observant Jews end their Sabbath by beckoning Elijah to come, "May Elijah the Prophet come

to us, heralding the Messiah, soon and in our days!”⁴ And at the Passover Seder, Jewish families have a cup at the table for Elijah, and literally open their door inviting Elijah to enter so that the Messiah might finally arrive.

**Being ready and being prepared
for the Lord involves turning
back to one another, turning
back to right ways of thinking.**

The angel Gabriel makes clear that John is coming to be the Elijah that Malachi had spoken of more than four hundred years earlier. And for us, today, as in Malachi’s day and John’s day, being ready and being prepared for the Lord involves turning back to one another, turning back to right ways of thinking. It means turning us toward our children and parents. It means turning us toward God. God says in Malachi 3:7b, “Return to me and I will return to you.” This turning, or returning, has a name: repentance.

Earlier in this chapter I shared with you stories of how transformed thinking can turn into transformed actions, one involving a young family who out of their grief and loss

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came to welcome seven hundred teens in foster care into their home. A second was a retiree who, out of her pain and loss, felt called to open her home to people reentering society after being incarcerated. Not everyone can do this dramatic kind of redemptive work. But we can all do something to foster kindness, to work for justice, to help others see the love of God and draw them back to him.

Several years ago, a high school junior in my congregation stopped me after church.⁵ He told me what he was doing at his school as a way of spreading hope and living his faith. He had started a group called Impact of Words. Here's how he explained it in a note he wrote to me:

Our goal is to spread kindness and love through small messages that we put on people's lockers. Every Wednesday a group of ten people meets after school for 30 minutes, and we write messages to teachers, administrators, students, and faculty. The messages consist of encouragement, gratitude and thankfulness. The idea came to me because of the increased number of suicides in our community.

I was also inspired by going to our church and hearing about trying to make God's kingdom a reality on earth by helping others. We write these messages to spread small acts of kindness

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but to also help people that feel depressed, anxious, or isolated to know that they are loved and cared for.

In a sense, Jackson and his friends acted as modern-day John the Baptists—messengers preparing the way for the Lord by helping people remember that their lives matter, that they are loved and valued. They did this by spreading kindness instead of hate or hurt or feelings of worthlessness and despair. They were seeking to help our world look like the kingdom of God; to be filled with people prepared for the Lord. This Advent, what are you doing to prepare the way of the Lord?

Lord, thank you for always hearing my prayers. Thank you for your compassion and love. Please forge from my disappointment and pain something good and beautiful. Help me to be ready to celebrate anew the birth of our Savior, but also to be found ready on that day when you return.