

Following the Scent

Second Sunday of Advent – December 7, 2003

Scripture Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Leviticus 2:1-2

When anyone presents a grain offering to the LORD, the offering shall be of choice flour; the worshiper shall pour oil on it, and put frankincense on it, ²and bring it to Aaron's sons the priests. After taking from it a handful of the choice flour and oil, with all its frankincense, the priest shall turn this token portion into smoke on the altar, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the LORD.

Luke 1:5-17

⁵In 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. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for 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. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With 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."

The "signs of Christmas" continue to point our way towards the birth of the Christ-child. This journey involves all our senses – seeing, smelling, hearing, and touching. We continue today with smelling!

The Swirling Scent of the Good News

Smells have a way of grabbing us like little else. The smell of snickerdoodles baking in the oven invariably takes me right into my mom's kitchen; truly, it's like I'm there. I can't smell Old Spice without being flooded by all sorts of warm feelings and loving memories of my grandfather, who was like a father to me. (Sometimes I even take a "hit" by grabbing a whiff from a bottle on a store shelf!) Such is the power of a smell.

The opening verses of Luke's Gospel are very orderly, even detached. But, beginning in the fifth verse, Luke throws us right into the ancient religion of the Jews and the scent of

Incense

"Incense" is a general term for aromatic plants that release a pleasing scent when burned. Frankincense and myrrh (yes, of three kings fame) are two such plants. Incense was highly prized in the ancient near east and was featured prominently in all the religions of that region, including Greek mythology (Myrrh is the name of Adonis' mother!). Incense was also used for cosmetic and medicinal purposes.

In Exodus 30, God commands that the priests of Israel are to burn holy incense in front of the "holy of holies" in the temple. The smoke from the incense will protect the priests from the presence of God. (See also Leviticus 16)

The practice of burning incense before God's altar continued to Jesus' day. Zechariah was a temple priest; one of many. The temple priests were divided into 24 groups each of which served twice a year for a week at a time. The privilege of actually entering the sanctuary to burn the incense offering and conduct the ritual was awarded by the drawing of lots from among the priests who had never done it. This privilege typically came to priest only once in a lifetime! Thus, the angel visits Zechariah at the pinnacle of his priestly career while a crowd of praying Jews waits outside for Zechariah to emerge.

burning incense swirls through it all. Zechariah is an old man when he is chosen to burn incense before the altar of the Lord God. Alone inside the sanctuary and somewhere in the middle of the ritual, the divine bursts in upon Zechariah and all thoughts of the sacred ceremony are set aside. Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, is standing on the right side of the altar. Not surprisingly, Zechariah is terrified. But Gabriel tells Zechariah that he has nothing to fear; his prayers are being answered.

Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, have always striven to lead holy lives, righteous and blameless. Zechariah is a temple priest and Elizabeth is a descendent of Aaron, brother of Moses and the first high priest of Israel. But still, their lives have been clouded by sadness and even disgrace. Zechariah and Elizabeth have not been able to have children and are too old for it to be any longer a realistic possibility. This would have fallen especially hard on Elizabeth. In their world, a woman's barrenness was seen to be a reproach from God. But now . . . an angel stands before Zechariah promising them a child, and not just any child! The angel tells Zechariah that many will rejoice at their son's birth. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit and he will lead many people back

The Birth of John the Baptizer

By the time that Gabriel interrupts Zechariah's incense offering, the Jews had waited hundreds of years for the arrival of their deliverer, their Messiah. Surely, many Jews had given up hope that they would ever see the decisive acts of God. Similarly, Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up hope of ever having children. But just as God burst in upon their lives, giving them a son, God would soon end the Jews' wait and burst in upon human history, bringing it to a climax in Jesus Christ.

Just as the announcement of John's birth precedes the announcement of his cousin's birth, so Luke tells of us John's birth before he tells us the story of Jesus' birth (see Luke 1:57-80).

When Elizabeth's baby is born, the neighbors are overjoyed. At the infant's circumcision ceremony, he is about to be named Zechariah, after his father, when Elizabeth announces that he is to be named John. Zechariah agrees to the naming and, at that moment, his speech is restored! The story is told throughout the area causing people to wonder, "What then is this child going to be?" They know, as Luke writes, that "indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him." Having recovered his speech, Zechariah pronounces a lengthy blessing upon his son, John. John "will be called the prophet of the Most High" and "will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins."

to the Lord, their God. In the spirit of Elijah, their son will make the people ready for the Lord. We will soon learn that their son will grow to be known as John the Baptist (or, more accurately, the Baptizer).

As you might imagine, all this is a little hard for Zechariah to believe; he wants some sign that the Gabriel's message is true. In fact, because he doubts the good news (the good news before the Good News!) brought by Gabriel, Zechariah is struck mute and will remain so until his son's birth. Indeed, when Zechariah emerges from the temple, the crowd understands that he has had a vision of some sort because he can do no more than make signs . . . he cannot speak. Elizabeth, of course, does become pregnant and in her sixth month of pregnancy, the angel Gabriel visits her cousin, Mary. But that story is for next week.

The good news before the Good News

The Jews of Jesus' day, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, expected their Messiah, their deliverer, to come with power and might. After all, isn't that how the world works? The Romans were powerful and mighty. Surely, God's anointed one would be much more powerful if he was to win God's victory . . . wouldn't he? But instead, in keeping with Israel's long history, the story of the Messiah begins with this devout old couple and would continue with an insignificant young woman from a small Galilean village. Long before, God had rescued a slave people. He could have chosen the people of some powerful empire, but he did not. God chose the enslaved, the poor, and the oppressed. On the world scene, Israel would never amount to much. But for God, a promise made is a promise kept. God would stand with those of little consequence.

Just as John will prepare the way for his cousin, Jesus, Luke prepares us for the story of Jesus' birth with the stories of Zechariah and Elizabeth in the lengthy first chapter of his Gospel. It's as if we must not be in too much of a hurry to get to the Christmas story. Our time of preparation matters if we are to truly comprehend what is to come.

Daily Bible Readings

(the full story of John's birth and some other notable births in the Bible)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Luke 1:5-25, 57-80 The full story of John's birth</p>	<p>Day 2 Genesis 15:1-6; 18:9-15; 21:1-7 God keeps his promise and gives a son to Abraham and Sarah (who is also way past child-bearing years).</p>
<p>Day 3 Genesis 30:1-24 Rachel, Jacob's wife, is childless for two years, but finally conceives and gives birth to Joseph (of the magic technicolor dreamcoat!).</p>	<p>Day 4 Judges 13 The birth of Samson; notice the very strong parallels to the story of John the Baptist's birth.</p>
<p>Day 5 1 Samuel 1 The birth of Samuel</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Book of the Month Recommendation for December – available in our bookstore *The Best Christian Writing of 2002*

Who has time to read a whole book at Christmas?? To answer my own question, I doubt most of us do. Thus, my recommendation for this month is an anthology of contemporary Christian writing from 2002. It is all in bite-sized pieces! One of the best things about an anthology is that you are introduced to lots of writers you might not otherwise meet. In this collection, you'll find selections ranging from Gabriel Reynolds' reflections on Islam to Walter Wangerin's memories of his father-in-law. You'll meet Amy Schwartz, an observing Jew who gives us an update of C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*. J. Bottums even shares some thoughts on Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. You may not agree with everything here, but (using a Christmas metaphor!) I invite you to sample some of these delicious treats.

Scott

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In his commentary on Luke, Alan Culpepper writes, "The opening scene in the Gospel tells of the end of Israel's waiting for the decisive, history-fulfilling acts of God. . . . Israel's plight is paralleled and dramatized by an aging couple's waiting and hoping for the birth of a child. In both cases, the waiting was so prolonged that hope was beginning to seem futile. The announcement of the coming birth of John, therefore, is a call for the renewing of hope and a challenge for the despairing to believe that it is never too late for those who wait upon the Lord." For what are you waiting? From what do you need deliverance? In your own life, what is the Good News . . . for you! . . . in the birth stories of John and Jesus? Try to be specific. What hopes do you cherish that might be fulfilled in Christmas? How can we begin to connect Advent and Christmas with our day-to-day lives? (Shopping doesn't count!)
2. Though Zechariah had stepped into the temple, he was not prepared to be confronted by the presence of God. He was certainly not prepared for his prayers to be answered, for surely he and his wife would never have children. Consider this. Are we prepared for God's presence in our lives? Do we really expect that our prayers will be answered? Can we see the presence of God in our midst? Two thousand years ago God burst in on the scene in a dramatic and unexpected way? What are some things we might do this Advent to help us be more prepared for God's bursting into our own lives and to trust that he does so?