

1st Sunday of Advent – Scripture Reading

Luke 1: 5-25, 57-80

adapted from The Voice translation

Narrator: To understand the life of Jesus, I must first give you some background history, events that occurred when Herod ruled Judea for the Roman Empire.

[Zacharias and Elizabeth come walking forward in the aisle]

Zacharias was serving as a priest in the temple in Jerusalem those days as his fathers had before him. He was a member of the priestly division of Abijah (a grandson of Aaron who innovated temple practices), and his wife, Elizabeth, was of the priestly lineage of Aaron, Moses' brother. They were good and just people in God's sight, walking with integrity in the Lord's ways and laws. Yet they had this sadness. Due to Elizabeth's infertility, they were childless, and at this time, they were both quite old—well past normal childbearing years.

One day Zacharias was chosen to perform his priestly duties in God's presence, according to the temple's normal schedule and routine.

[Zacharias goes to the altar and Elizabeth stays at the front some distance away]

He had been selected from all the priests by the customary procedure of casting lots for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to enter the sacred precincts of the temple. There he burned sweet incense, while outside a large crowd of people prayed.

Congregation: Praying, praying, praying!

Narrator: Suddenly Zacharias realized he was not alone: a messenger of the Lord was there with him.

[Angel with winged script appears at the altar]

The messenger stood just to the right of the altar of incense.

[Zacharias makes a scared face]

Zacharias was shocked and afraid, but the messenger reassured him.

Messenger: Zacharias, calm down! Don't be afraid! Zacharias, your prayers have been heard. Your wife is going to have a son, and you will name him John. He will bring you great joy and happiness—and many will share your joy at John's birth.

This son of yours will be a great man in God's sight. He will not drink alcohol in any form; instead of alcoholic spirits, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the time he is in his mother's womb. Here is his mission: he will turn many of the children of Israel around to follow the path to the Lord their God. Do you remember the prophecy about someone to come in the spirit and power of the prophet Elijah; someone who will turn the hearts of the parents back to their children; someone who will turn the hearts of the disobedient to the mind-set of the just and good? Your son is the one who will fulfill this prophecy: he will be the Lord's forerunner, the one who will prepare the people and make them ready for God.

Zacharias: How can I be sure of what you're telling me? I am an old man, and my wife is far past the normal age for women to bear children. This is hard to believe!

Messenger *[sternly]*: I am Gabriel, the messenger who inhabits God's presence. I was sent here to talk with you and bring you this good news. Because you didn't believe my message, you will not be able to talk—not another word—until you experience the fulfillment of my words.

Narrator: Meanwhile the crowd at the temple wondered why Zacharias hadn't come out of the sanctuary yet.

Congregation: I wonder why Zacharias hasn't come out of the sanctuary yet?!

Narrator: It wasn't normal for the priest to be delayed so long. When at last he came out, he was making signs with his hands to give the blessing, but he couldn't speak

[Zacharias makes erratic hand-waving signals, trying to tell them what happened].

They realized he had seen some sort of vision. When his time on duty at the temple came to an end, he went back home to his wife.

Shortly after his return, Elizabeth became pregnant. She avoided public contact for the next five months.

Elizabeth: I have lived with the disgrace of being barren for all these years. Now God has looked on me with favor. When I go out in public with my baby, I will not be disgraced any longer.

Narrator: When the time was right, Elizabeth gave birth to a son. News about the Lord's special kindness to her had spread through her extended family and the community. Everyone shared her joy, for after all these years of infertility, she had a son! As was customary, eight days after the baby's birth the time came for his circumcision and naming. Everyone assumed he would be named Zacharias, like his father.

Elizabeth *[disagreeing]*: No. We will name him John.

Congregation *[protesting]*: That name is found nowhere in your family. Zacharias, what do YOU want the baby's name to be?

Narrator: He motioned for a tablet, and he wrote, “His name is John.”

[accompaniment for anthem begins under]

Everyone was shocked by this breach of family custom. They were even more surprised when, at that moment, Zacharias was able to talk again, and he shouted out praises to God. A sense of reverence spread through the whole community.

People: Wow!

Narrator: In fact, this story was spread throughout the hilly countryside of Judea. People were certain that God’s hand was on this child, and they wondered what sort of person John would turn out to be when he became a man.

When Zacharias’s voice was restored to him, he sang from the fullness of the Spirit a prophetic blessing.

[Owen sings “Now Bless the God of Israel”.]