

Good morning everyone. Welcome to this Sunday, the second Sunday of Advent.  
This season leading up to the celebration of Christmas.

Sometimes this time of the year gets busy and we lose sight of what Christmas is really about. So this morning as I begin, I would like us to slow ourselves down.  
To think about Jesus and his birth all those years ago.

*prayer*

Let us pray

In this Advent season of waiting on you O Lord.  
we trust in you and your goodness  
We rely on your mercy  
We find shelter in your steadfast love  
In this Advent season of waiting on you O Lord,  
we walk in your way.  
We follow your example of love.  
We keep our covenant promises.  
In this Advent season of waiting,  
Lord forgive our sins.  
Remember your love,  
Remember each one of us.  
Remember your people everywhere.  
In this Advent season of waiting,  
Lord we wait for your salvation.  
We wait for your leading,  
We wait for your coming.  
Amen.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were a lovely couple. They lived in a small town in the hill country of Judea, in the Southern area of Israel, living there in those years of silence. The years after the old testament was written but before Jesus was born.

Both Elizabeth and Zechariah were always doing good things, they were a caring and considerate couple. Zechariah was a priest, you just had to look at him and what he did to know that was the right thing for him to do.

But if you looked at Elizabeth and Zechariah as a couple you would start to wonder where their grandchildren were, since when you saw them, that would be what you would expect their stage of life to be. But they did not have any grandchildren, they did not have any children. Elizabeth had been barren, childless for year after year, right through their marriage and now they were both advanced in years, no longer young, however you describe it, it really means the same thing. They were old and they did not have any children.

And then something miraculous happened. A real miracle. Zechariah had been at the temple, he had entered the sanctuary and when he had come out, he was unable to talk. And then after that Elizabeth became pregnant. That was a real miracle.

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, everyone in the neighbourhood and all her relatives were so excited for her. I guess a few of them would be concerned as well, childbirth when you are old is a risky business. But a baby boy was safely born. The eighth day came, and in the tradition of that time in Israel, that was the day that a child was named and the males were circumcised. And so during that ceremony all the relatives wanted to name him Zechariah after his Dad, but Elizabeth said, no his name is John a name that means Jehovah, God is a gracious giver. So the relatives, said - well let's ask his Dad then. And Zechariah, still unable to talk motioned for a writing tablet and wrote on it, his name is John. And immediately after he did that Zechariah could speak again. And filled with the Holy Spirit he began to praise God, and spoke a prophecy. One that even has its own name the Benedictus, the good words.

It is found in Luke chapter 1: verses 68 to 80

*“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.  
He has raised up a mighty saviour for us  
in the house of his servant David,  
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,  
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate  
us.*

*God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant,  
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,  
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness  
before him all our days.*

*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins.*

*By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

And the child, John the Baptist grew and became strong in spirit, and he was  
in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Now that prophecy from Zechariah, was something that was incredibly significant. There had been so much that had gone on in Zechariah's life in the 9 to 10 months before that. And he hadn't been able to talk about any of it. Now some of us like a bit of silence, but not talking for that long - well you would wonder if you would ever be able to talk again.

So now he could make up for it, saying what was on his heart, saying what God's Holy Spirit inspired him to say and that is there in this prophecy.

Now there are two parts in this prophecy. The first talks about Jesus and what Jesus was going to do. That Jesus was going to save us, that through Jesus, God was going to show mercy to us. Through Jesus we would be rescued.

And the second part of the prophecy, well that talks about John the Baptist. And the part that he was going to play in God's story.

He would prepare the way.

Now this time of year is a time of preparation.

For some of us there are preparations we do that are things to do with Christmas. Jo and I have ordered half a ham for Christmas. We know when Ben, Devon and Hayden plan to be with us. Some things are done. For others - well I am a guy, some things I leave till a bit closer to the day. But we do prepare for Christmas. Preparation is essential.

For some people who are here this morning from places like Vanuatu, well the last months would have been times of preparation. Signing contracts, saying goodbye, travelling to New Zealand. Preparing for your time here.

Preparation is essential in most things that we do.

John the Baptist was preparing the way for Jesus and Jesus ministry. That was to be built on the foundations of what John the Baptist did. That prophecy that his Dad, inspired by the Holy Spirit gave to him was that he was going to go before Jesus, he was going to prepare the way. Through John, God was going to give people knowledge of salvation, through John, God was going to tell people about how to be forgiven for their sins. You see, people were living in darkness, death was casting a shadow. Palm 23 talks about walking through the valley of the shadow of death. And this prophecy talks about dawn breaking into the darkness, of there being light to those sitting in the darkness. That there would be light to those in the shadow of death. And light changes what shadows look like. We might still be in a valley, but if we have a light, then we are no longer in the shadows. Since by the forgiveness of sins. By experiencing the tender mercy of our God. We can experience the light of dawn, we can experience the light of God being with us. Through this our feet are guided into the way of peace. Real peace, full peace. Completeness. That is what the prophecy was about. Now all of that sounds very straightforward. Many of us have read these passages time after time over the years and that is what they say. But, as I have been thinking during the week about this. I have started to wonder a couple of things, just using little words - why and how. Why did Jesus need John the Baptist to prepare the way for him.

Jesus, was the divine son of God, Wholly God, wholly human. Jesus, was the one who performed miracles. Jesus was the light of the world.

Why would he need someone else to prepare the way for him. That seems strange. Surely Jesus would do everything himself, and all that he needed was someone to write down what was happening and carry his bags.

And those were things that John didn't do.

And then how, how did John prepare the way for Jesus. Being at a building site and seeing foundations being dug, that is something you can look at and touch. But John didn't do anything as obvious as that.

So what did John do when he got older? Well he was in the wilderness, he was in the region around the Jordan river, proclaiming, speaking about a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Telling people that they needed to get right with God.

And the way that he did things was quite different to the way Jesus did things.

In Luke 7 :33 to 34, Jesus talks about people who had rejected what John the Baptist had said as well as rejecting what he had said and Jesus said

*For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!*

So how John did things, what he looked like what he ate and drank, was massively different to the way Jesus did things. John did not drink wine or grape juice, or even eat raisins. The first miracle Jesus did was turn water into wine.

John did not touch dead bodies, Jesus raised people who were dead back to life.

Those are huge differences.

But God was using both of them. Both of them were fulfilling what God wanted them to do. Both of them were living a radical lifestyle.

John by not drinking wine or eating bread, living in the wilderness, the small out of the way places, and telling people in a loud voice that they needed to get right with God. That was preparing the way for Jesus.

And Jesus followed John, by being a friend of tax collectors and sinners, by eating and drinking with people who good upright Jews didn't eat and drink with and talking and showing people about getting right with God.

Both of them living radical lifestyles, both of them sharing messages from God, both of them helping people connect with God. Both working together, with some great similarities, but huge differences as well. And you could not have someone who did both at the same time. It just could not work.

But working together as a combination, well that is a different story.

It is like making a cake, you need a cake mixer, or something like that to mix things together, and you need an oven or something like that to bake it in. You need both. Both have a place. You can't do it all with just a mixer or just an oven. God needed John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus. Both John and Jesus needed to work together. Jesus needed John.

Now John was just a normal person, but God needed to use him. His parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah were a childless couple who were getting on a bit, fairly normal people, who God used. They were woven into God's story, the bigger story of Christmas and what it means.

Now right near the end of that prophecy that was today's reading, Jesus coming was described as a *dawn from on high breaking on us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

People still sit in darkness, people still live in the shadow of death. There are people who do not know God. there are those who do not follow Jesus. There are those we know who need God's light in their lives. People who need guidance for their feet, for their walk and the things that they do. And that happens by people experiencing God's forgiveness for their sins, for the times when the mark has been missed. By experiencing the tenderness and mercy of God.

So what about us, what is the role that we have.

Well remember John the Baptist, and what that prophecy was about. There was preparation that John needed to do, that God called him to do, to prepare for Jesus. For each of us, we have a role to play. God uses us in his plan of restoration. God uses normal people. What God calls each of us to do might be different. We are all different. But being a follower of Jesus is not something secret between ourselves and God. It is not even just about our relationship with God. It is bigger than that. God's plan is that the dawn from on high would break out. That is what we yearn for, that is what we can work with God to see happen. We can ask God what he wants us to do. What role he wants us to have. We can ask, we can listen, and then we can act.

Since God's plan is that the dawn from on high would break out. That the full light of day would be there for everyone who chooses to open their eyes.

Let us pray...

