

Ia. Christmas Begins in the Dark

For the world around us, the Christmas season begins with an exultation of light. Strings of lights start adorning the eaves of homes soon after Thanksgiving, if not before. Those illuminated, blow-up Santas and Snowmen start rising up from front lawns. For the world around us, the Christmas season begins with an exultation of light. But, for Christians, Christmas – the real Christmas – begins not in the cheerful lights of the holiday season. For Christians, Christmas begins in the dark.

Luke opens his Gospel by addressing one “*most excellent Theophilus.*” Scholars debate whether this was an actual person, or whether the name suggests a much broader audience – the name “Theophilus” literally means “friend of God”. Maybe there really was a Theophilus – I don’t know – but I think Luke’s intention in writing his Gospel is made clear through that name: he is writing to all who seek to be the friends of God. Those who know that they are loved by God and who are seeking to love God in return. He is writing to compile a narrative of all that has been accomplished for us in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But first comes the darkness: “*In the days of Herod, king of Judea . . .*” There is a whole world of darkness contained in that simple statement. That Herod was king over Judea meant that Rome, not the house and lineage of King David, presently ruled over God’s people. God had long ago promised His people that a king from David’s line would one day arise and reign over God’s people forevermore. But the line of David had long since been removed from the throne. First had come the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, and now the Romans. And that promise of God about that great king from the line of David who would rule over His people forevermore had become a more and more distant hope in the hearts of God’s people with every passing year. And this current king, Herod – suffice it to say that he was a particularly nasty piece of work. Ruthlessly ambitious, recklessly violent, scornful and oppressive in his dealings with the people of God. In the days before Jesus was born, there was darkness in the land of Israel, darkness hanging over the hearts and hopes of the people of God.

And having said all of that simply by mentioning Herod’s name, Luke then turns his attention to two individual Israelites – and the personal darkness that lay over their hearts and hopes. Zechariah, a priest descended from Aaron himself, and his wife Elizabeth, herself descended from the daughters of Aaron – both of them righteous before God, walking blamelessly before God and their fellow Israelites. Good people. “*But,*” writes Luke, “*they had no child . . . and both were advanced in years.*” And with those few words we enter into the personal darkness of these two good and God-fearing people – their private sadness. Luke is telling us that with these two good people, in the middle of the darkness of their own personal sorrow, everything that is to follow about the story of Jesus begins. Luke tells us, once again, that Christmas begins in the dark. For Israel as a whole, and for Elizabeth and Zechariah personally, Christmas begins in the dark.

Christmas begins in the dark. Which means, for us, that if we would know this year the true light which Christmas brings – that holy Light immeasurably brighter than the lights we hang

upon our homes and our trees – then this is where Christmas must also begin for us: in the dark. For is there not darkness in our world this Advent season in the year of our Lord 2021? And do we not find pockets of darkness within our own hearts as we enter into this season? Hopes that have dimmed, sorrows that have multiplied, sufferings and shortcomings and sickness and sadness? The world around us tells us to ignore that darkness – to just string up the lights and pretend that everything is merry and bright. But Christmas, true Christmas, begins in acknowledging the darkness, so that we might learn to yearn for the coming of the Light of Christ. Christmas, true Christmas – for the people of God – begins in the dark.

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Luke 1:8-18

December 5, 2021

Ib. To Us a Child Is Born, To Us a Son Is Given

Christmas begins in the dark. But the good news of Christmas is that the darkness is now overcome by the great and eternal light of God’s redeeming love for us. As the prophet has written:

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shined . . .
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given.*

Zechariah was serving as priest in the Temple when he was chosen to be the one to enter the holiest room of the Temple to burn incense, representing the prayers of the people, to God. So, no doubt he was already in a state of heightened emotion, perhaps even fear and trembling, when he entered into that sacred space to perform his sacred duty. But what greater fear and trembling must have come over him as he entered in only to behold an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. Angels in the Bible are often described as being “dazzling” in appearance – bright light radiating from them and all around them. No doubt this angel – who was Gabriel, God’s chief messenger to mortals – was radiating a light which must have seemed all the more dazzling to Zechariah in the confined space and relative darkness of that inner sanctum.

But the real light shining in the darkness came not from Gabriel’s appearance, but from Gabriel’s message to Zechariah: *“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord.”* Zechariah, in his fear and trembling was only barely capable of comprehending what the angel had said – much less was he able to believe it: *“How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”* Gabriel assures Zechariah that it is God Himself who will make this impossible thing possible – that it is God Himself who is intending to bring this great joy to pass.

And with that, suddenly, there is now light shining into the darkness of Elizabeth and Zechariah's long sorrow – promising to turn that sorrow of their barrenness into this new, seemingly impossible, joy of a child to be born, a son to be given. But then Gabriel proclaims something even more wondrous: that this light now shining upon Elizabeth and Zechariah's personal darkness, is intended by God as a sign of an even greater light still to come, of an even greater joy yet to be given, of an even greater child soon also to be born.

For this child to be born to Elizabeth and Zechariah is intended by God not just to bring joy to these two elderly souls, but will serve to prepare the way for something God is about to do for all people, for all who are walking in darkness. If the birth of John will be a light shining into the darkness of his parent's sorrowful hearts, the birth of that greater child to follow will be the coming of THE Light, the One who is the Light of the World, shining into the darkness of every human heart. Elizabeth and Zechariah's son, says the angel:

... will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

A people prepared to welcome the Light which God soon will shine upon this land of deep darkness. A people prepared to bow down before this greater child who will be born, this greater Son who will save us from the darkness forevermore. *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.”*

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Luke 1:18-25

December 5, 2021

Ic. A People Prepared

Elizabeth and Zechariah's son, said the angel Gabriel, would *“make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”* A people prepared for the coming birth of God's own Son, Jesus. When Elizabeth and Zechariah's son, whom we know as John the Baptist, was fully grown, that is precisely what he did – the new Elijah, fulfilling the prophecy found in the book of Isaiah:

*The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.”*

At the core of John the Baptist's preaching was an invitation to repentance – that word literally meaning to change one's mind, to turn 180 degrees in one's orientation and outlook. Or, more specifically, to turn away from the idols of this world, and to turn towards the Lord our

Maker. This also was in accordance with what Gabriel foretold – that the specific means by which Elizabeth and Zechariah’s son would “*make ready for the Lord a people prepared*” would be by turning the children of Israel back towards the Lord their God. And also by turning “*the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just,*” In other words, a whole life repentance – one echoing the two greatest commandments, that we should love the Lord our God above all else (“*turning many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God*”), and that we should love our neighbor as ourself (“*turning the hearts of the fathers to the children*”)

This season of Advent, therefore, is a season of repentance. A time in which we are invited to heed the message of Elizabeth and Zechariah’s son – and so to repent. And so to reorient our lives away from the darkness and toward the coming One who is the Light of the World. A season to redirect our lives, also, towards those around us whom we are commanded to love in Christ Jesus. If Christmas begins in the darkness, then Advent is the season in which we are called to recognize that darkness which dwells within our own lives, and to turn away from it – to turn towards the Lord our God, and towards those whom we are given to love.

And so, this work of Advent, of becoming a people prepared for Christ at Christmas, can be a very deep and difficult undertaking. It is not a casual chore, to be considered only after the tree is decorated and the shopping is done – but rather one which should be considered as our primary work in the days leading up to December 25. It is not easy. But, to help us, our story also offers a suggestion for how we might do this. Zechariah, having doubted Gabriel’s proclamation, is rendered silent until his son is born. And silence comes to Elizabeth as well. For the first five months of her pregnancy, she keeps herself hidden – she retreats into pondering and praying regarding what the Lord had done for her. Silence, pondering the Word God has spoken to us, and praying – that is not a bad prescription for how to do the work of Advent, that we might be a people prepared for Christmas.

A pastor tells of a group in his church which formed one Advent season – they called themselves the QCC, the “Quiet Christmas Club”. Membership was open to everyone, and there were only two rules: one, no more complaining about how busy you are, how rushed and tired and overwhelmed you are by the stress of the season; and two, to observe a time of silence every day in which to ponder and to pray, like Elizabeth in her solitude – silence in which to consider our great need for the great gift which God at Christmas gives to us anew.

Christmas begins in the dark. For only in the darkness do we truly come to understand our great need for God’s Light, come to discover our great yearning for that Child who comes to be born among us as the “Light of the World”. Let us, therefore, become a people prepared – a people ready to receive Him when He comes to us anew this Christmas.