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Advent 2/C  
Baruch 5:1-9  
Canticle 16  
Philippians 1:3-11  
Luke 3:1-6

*And you child, will be called prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.*

Zechariah was silent for nine months. No word did he utter, no question did he ask, no prayer did he voice.

You see, unable to comprehend that his most fervent personal prayer might be answered – the seemingly impossible gift of a child for he and his wife Elizabeth in their old age – he questioned the angel Gabriel when he appeared with such tidings.

It seems you don't question a messenger from God.

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I wonder what it was like for Zechariah, those nine months.

What was it like to share his joy and worry and hopes with Elizabeth as her stomach grew each week, but without words? How did he feel about the idle tongues of others, whispering about his speechlessness and what it meant? What did he hear, in his own mind and around him, that he would have otherwise missed, with his regular ability to direct conversation and life.

Did he realize the gift he'd been given?

I imagine Zechariah spent more time at home, temporarily relieved of his priestly duties. I imagine he overheard Elizabeth and Mary greeting one another, the sharing of each other's miraculous news, and Mary's song of praise and wonder. I imagine he dreamt of the face of his child, and the words that would appear on his lips on the day his voice returned.

We are told that upon holding his son in his arms for the first time, his silence was broken and he proclaimed a mighty song – the song we *said/sang* just a few minutes ago as our canticle.

Zachariah – the priest who knew what it felt like to stand in the most sacred place of all – “the sanctuary of the Lord” – seemed to have the most profound spiritual experience of his life at home, holding his newborn baby.<sup>1</sup>

This was no Hallmark greeting card commercial moment. No, this was a liminal space. A thin space where the power of the messenger of God was felt as speechlessness fell away, and the power to proclaim God's love and hope surged forth anew.

A prophetic *moment*, if you will, when God came so close to Zechariah, and Zechariah came so close to God, that Zechariah understood something new was happening, and *would* be happening, through the man the tiny bundle of wailing infant in his hands would become.

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<sup>1</sup> Katheryn Matthews, Sermon Seeds, [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org).

Hear again Zechariah's song – as a song:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.  
He has raised up a mighty savior 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.

Thus he 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.”<sup>2</sup>

Scholar Katheryn Matthews notes that Zechariah sang of a salvation that heals the damage of the world caused by sin and brokenness, greed and hatred and violence; he sang of a restoration of things to what they *ought* to be,<sup>3</sup> and more importantly what *would* be.

He sang of the coming of the savior – the one who would help people get ready – the mercy of God to bring light and peace.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:68-79, NRSV / chanted to *St. Gregory Anaphora* – Christopher Putnam.

<sup>3</sup> Kate Huey, Sermon Seeds, [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org).

It is a song for us, here in our time, as well, and it prepares us for the man, John, to whom the word of God came while he was in the wilderness.

If Zechariah and Elizabeth were insiders, part of those within the religious establishment, John was definitely by the time we hear of him in today's passage, an outsider. I imagine they were proud, if fearful for him. This is what Zechariah's song points toward, but there is a long history of prophets being persecuted for speaking truth to power, and in the end the same will be true for John.

In our story today however, John is just beginning his work, proclaiming all around the region of the Jordan the need for a *baptism of repentance* **for the forgiveness of sins.**

Luke gives us important context for this prophet and his actions by way of his lengthy introduction. He lists seven historical political figures, both Roman rulers and Jewish leaders.

It is designed to give us a fairly specific date, but beyond the list of names and places, it is a story of oppression and misery that was building to an explosion point.<sup>4</sup>

The Jewish people were once again under foreign rule. Many did not regard Herod's sons as real rulers, seeing them as a self-made royal house that ruled by fear and oppression, and the high priests weren't much better.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wright, N.T. *Luke for Everyone*, pg. 32.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, N.T. *Luke for Everyone*, pg. 32.

People longed for a new word from God.

Raised in a priestly house, full of knowledge and power, but with a fiery edge that spoke of something new, John appeared in the wilderness with a mission and just such a word.

As Luke tells us, drawing from the prophet Isaiah, John came as “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness” saying, *Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*

When I think of this passage I always remember it as John being the one who will prepare the way, and make paths straight. And he certainly does that. But only because he lived what he preached to others.

Look at it again in your bulletin. It was the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness that called **all who would listen** to prepare the way of the Lord.

That meant all who heard his voice, including us. And for John, the way to get ready for God doing something new, the way to **be ready** to welcome the Christ, was to *repent and seek forgiveness of sins*.

This is what we are called to as we come close to the Mystery of the Incarnation.

It's akin to preparing our homes for the holidays – for guests and get-togethers, for family and traditions.

How many of you agree with me that your house is never cleaner than five minutes before people arrive?

When we know friends will be coming to visit we vacuum and dust, clean the bathrooms, wipe the kitchen counters, finally clean the burners on the stove. We light scented candles or incense. We make sure there will be enough food and beverages, enough seats at our table, enough love to welcome everyone.

In our families we make meaning by engaging in ritual and tradition. Lighting the Advent wreath every night before dinner. We decorate a tree. We hang stockings.

We get ready. We prepare. We anticipate.

John calls us to do all this, but with our hearts and minds.

Repent. Meaning literally, **turn around**, until you are facing God again. It is an exhortation to examine our lives, values, and priorities.

It is only in repenting that we see our sins, those things that keep us from the love of God, and in then seeking forgiveness for those sins we can begin to make those changes which turn us toward God again.

John knew that this was the important first step we all must take in order to get to welcome Jesus into our hearts and lives, a spiritual ritual of house-cleaning if you will.

This is the work of Advent. The beginning is near. We must all do the work of getting ready.

*And you child, will be called prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.*

Give us grace, O Lord, to prepare our hearts, our minds, and our lives for the coming of your Son this Advent!

~ AMEN ~