

Zephaniah 3:14-17

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

The Lord has taken away the judgments against you,

he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;

you shall fear disaster no more.

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands go limp.

The Lord, your God, is in your midst,

a warrior who gives victory;

he will rejoice over you with gladness,

he will renew you in his love;

he will exult over you with singing.

Luke 1:57-80

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. All their neighbours were filled with awe, and these things were talked about throughout the hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

'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.

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.'

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

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was Governor of Judea and Herod was ruler of Galilee ... during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"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." '

MESSAGE [An adventure centuries in the making](#)

One of the characteristics of our culture is that everything has to be **new** for Christmas ... so gifts and toys need to be new, decorations and table settings need to be new, wear new clothes ... at least that's what the advertisers want us to believe.



But often Christmas is about **older traditions** ... like favourite family recipes passed down from one generation to another, perhaps traditions like secret Santa and of course the singing of traditional Christmas carols ...
... so Christmas is a mix of old and new.

In our Bible readings today there is a similar sense of old and new. God is doing a new thing through John, but at the same time the expectation and hope for God to act is very old, centuries old, as written in the ancient prophecies of Israel. So in keeping with our theme that Advent is an invitation to adventure, today is **an adventure centuries in the making**.

Our focus today is on Zechariah and John, two important supporting actors in Luke's story about Jesus.

When we last met Zechariah, he was serving as a priest at the temple in Jerusalem and had a rather overwhelming encounter with the angel Gabriel who tells him that his wife Elizabeth will have a son whom he is to name John. Zechariah struggles to believe this message as he and Elizabeth are both quite old. The result is that Zechariah is struck dumb and cannot speak, but he goes home and Elizabeth does conceive a child.



In some ways Zechariah is the **antihero** in the Christmas story – a significant character but one who lacks heroic qualities like courage and idealism ...

- Zechariah is old where Mary – the main star – is young;
- Z is wearied from too much religion where Mary is innocent and fresh;
- Z is cynical about some of God's ways where Mary is trusting.

But Zechariah is changed by his encounter with Gabriel ... and I imagine that he's been on his own **silent adventure** since that meeting in the temple. This 'adventure' lasts through all the months of Elizabeth's pregnancy. In the enforced silence, what has Zechariah heard? Perhaps he has heard the sounds of domestic life that he hadn't ever paid attention to before? Perhaps he has heard the quiet but insistent voice of God? Perhaps he has heard God speaking through the Scriptures and through his circumstances.

It may seem odd that an adventure could unfold in silence but many devout people through the centuries have found that if we want to hear from God or deepen our relationship with God then silence is key ... quieting ourselves and blocking out the external noise and distractions. It's why a daily devotional time is often called **a quiet time**, when we deliberately choose to listen for what God may be saying to us.

When Zechariah's son is born and the time comes to name him, Zechariah gives him the name **John**, as instructed by Gabriel. This Hebrew name *Yohanon* means graced by Yahweh or perhaps Yahweh is gracious. Note that Yahweh is God's name as revealed to Moses at the burning bush. In our Bibles, it is usually printed as LORD. In Hebrew it means 'I am'.



The change in Zechariah may be seen by what he now prophesies ...



The Lord – Yahweh – has redeemed his people, raised up a Saviour in the house of David, brought salvation from enemies, shown mercy as promised to the ancestors and remembering the ancient covenant with Abraham to bless God's people who can now serve God in holiness and righteousness ... these promises seem so sure to Zechariah that he speaks about them as **already** accomplished.

His words are full of faith and hope. The earlier doubts and cynicism have gone and been replaced by a **new vision** ... or actually by an **old vision** that comes from Israel's foundational story of the Exodus and then re-imagined in the writings of Isaiah. Zechariah is reminding the people of God's old promises to once again rescue and redeem and restore Israel. God is coming to set Israel free ... free from the violent oppression of Rome and free from the entanglements of sin and disappointment.

In part, God will bring about this rescue act through Zechariah's son, John, who will grow to become a prophet. We already know from Gabriel's message to **Mary** that it is **her** son, **Jesus**, who will be the Saviour from the house of David. So John will not be the main act but rather a **forerunner**. He will come before Jesus and his task will be to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord – Yahweh – to give them knowledge of salvation that will come through forgiveness of their sins.

As John brings this message it will be like **dawn** shining upon the people from heaven, like **light** coming on those sitting in darkness and providing a guide to God's way of **peace**.



If you listen to the sample of John's preaching that Luke offers us – which we didn't read – it's old school Hebrew prophecy – warning the people of God's coming judgment if they don't turn their lives around. It seems ironic to be thinking about John's message on what is known as **Joy Sunday** in Advent – because his message doesn't seem very joyful.

But there's more going on here than we think.

The first positive sign is that God's word does not come to any of the rulers and holders of power in Rome or Galilee or Jerusalem ... rather God's word comes to John **in the wilderness**, another often silent place where one can more easily hear from God.

Luke writes that John is the voice crying in the wilderness from Isaiah 40:

*'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight. ...
all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'* (Isaiah 40:3-5)

While John's message of repentance is not joyful ... John is fulfilling his part, his role in God's adventure ... bringing a message that is **challenging** rather than **comfortable**, that is **disturbing** rather than **peaceful**. But God's good news of redemption and restoration is not all sweet and sentimental. It needs the people to **change their thinking**, to embrace their struggle and overcome their apathy and resignation. This good news is that God is inviting the people to start again ... to embrace new life ... to begin a new adventure!



Whose way is John preparing for?

Is he preparing the way for Yahweh, the Lord who is named in Isaiah 40?

If we read on just a bit, we learn that John is actually preparing the way for **Jesus**, who will also be called **Lord**, a sign of his intimate and mysterious connection with God.

Unlike in Mark's or Matthew's Gospel, Luke chooses to give the full quotation from Isaiah 40:3-5, finishing with the line that **all flesh shall see God's salvation**. So the message is not just for Israel but rather is for everyone ... which is a new emphasis on an old and ancient message ... and the first sign in Luke's story of the new adventure that is unfolding.

Part of John's adventure out in the wilderness is calling people – including us – to see God in a new light.

God is **faithful** and keeps promises.

God is **powerful** and can redeem people from hopeless situations.

God is **present with us** and cares and acts.

God **rejoices** over us with singing according to our other reading today.

This God whom we worship and follow calls us into deeper water, challenges us to move from our comfortable life.

We might think that if we know God more deeply, surely our life will become better and more blessed, more peaceful, with less problems, an easier life?

Sorry to break that illusion or fantasy of faith ... Zechariah and John's experience is that an adventure with God is much more likely to **stretch** us, to encourage us to attempt things we never imagined or thought possible, to make us rely on God rather than our own resources ... and yet at the same time fill us with joy and a sense of rightness.

I'm sure that some of us – many of us perhaps – have experienced this joy in our spirits when we have trusted and stepped out to attempt new things with God.

Embarking on such an adventure will always be new and fresh ... but also old ... an adventure promised in the prophets ... a voice that never stops calling out to God's people ... get ready to engage with God.

It's an old old message yet it's new every morning, just like the sunrise.

It's a message to those feeling downtrodden or forgotten or facing what seems like death ...
... lift up your heads, see the new day dawning. Choose to walk with God afresh.



SONG HGSP 291 When out of poverty is born (tune Kingsfold TiS 585)

When out of poverty is born
a dream that will not die,
and landless, weary folk find strength
to stand with heads held high,
it's then we learn from those who wait
to greet the promised day,
'The Lord is coming; don't lose heart.
Be blest: prepare the way!'

When people wander far from God,
forget to share their bread,
they find their wealth an empty thing,
their spirits are not fed.
For only just and tender love
the hungry soul will stay.
And so God's prophets echo still
'Be blest: prepare the way!'

When God took flesh and came to earth,
the world turned upside down,
and in the strength of woman's faith
the Word of Life was born.
She knew that God would raise the low,
it pleased her to obey.
Rejoice with Mary in the call,
'Be blest: prepare the way!'

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