

Psalm 25:1-10

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

**I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.**

No one who hopes in you
will ever be put to shame,
**but shame will come on those
who are treacherous without cause.**

Show me your ways, Lord,
teach me your paths.
**Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Saviour,
and my hope is in you all day long.**

Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love,
for they are from of old.

**Do not remember the sins of my youth
and my rebellious ways;**

according to your love remember me,
for you, Lord, are good.

**Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.**

He guides the humble in what is right
and teaches them his way.

**All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful
toward those who keep the demands of his covenant.**

Luke 1:5-25

In the days of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'

Zechariah asked the angel, ‘How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.’ The angel said to him, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.’

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. 'The Lord has done this for me,' she said. 'In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.'

MESSAGE An adventure beyond religion

The word **Advent** means arrival or coming ... so this time of year in the church calendar is often seen as a time of **waiting** for the arrival of the birth of Jesus; i.e. we are waiting for Christmas.

This is not all that helpful as many of us aren't very good at waiting for things ... it's a rather passive pastime.



Also the advertising industry inundates us with messages at this time of year that distract us and encourage us to consume extravagantly and to buy unneeded gifts.



I've often wondered about changing the conversation slightly from a focus on **Advent** to a focus on **adventure**, which comes from a related word in Latin meaning something that happens by chance or fortune. Adventure also suggests an **active response** rather than a more passive waiting. So this year I'm inviting you to join me on an adventure through Advent.



Of course coming out of two long years of **Covid** with long and frustrating lockdowns means that many of us are feeling quite flat and tired and probably in no mood for an adventure. We've been told so often these last two years to stay home and stay safe.

And being honest it's hard to have much of an adventure at home.

But now as life returns to something approaching a new normal, perhaps we're ready for some excitement.

My first adventurous act has been to ignore the Lectionary readings for Advent and instead go with what makes a lot more sense to me, namely to follow the flow of the story as Luke tells it, given that we've just begun Year C of the Lectionary cycle which is the year of Luke.

We are used to thinking about Christmas as mostly being about the birth of a baby – Jesus. And in a way this is true. We imagine that Advent is similar – that it's mostly about babies. And again it's true that Luke's telling of the story compares and contrasts the birth of **two** babies – Jesus and John. But Luke's Advent story is really **an origin story** – telling us about the origins of Jesus. And that origin story is mostly about **adults**, several of whom are quite elderly ... including Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, and probably Joseph as well.



Advent picks up on **their** hopes, **their** faithfulness ... and how God moved among **them** to bring a sense of a new dawn, a new adventure that was about to begin. Over the next four weeks I hope to capture something of this sense of excitement at what God was doing and is doing today and where God may be calling us.

This first week I've called **An adventure beyond religion**.

Zechariah was a **priest** in the order of Abijah, in the line of Aaron, the first High Priest in Israel. His wife Elizabeth was also descended from Aaron, so they are a priestly couple.



Zechariah served in the temple at Jerusalem, the central focus of Jewish worship, the centre of the Jewish religion.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are described as **righteous** and **blameless**, meticulously keeping all the commandments of God.



They are also **old** ... and **have no children**.

In some ways they are similar to Abraham and Sarah.

One day Zechariah is serving in the temple and enters the inner sanctuary to light incense, symbolising the prayers of the people rising up before God in heaven.



He sees an angel and is terrified.

Angels are not cute but rather fearsome.

One of their names is **seraph** meaning **burning one**.

So angels inspire **awe** and **fear**.

The angel has a message for Zechariah ... that he will have a son who will be named John and who will become a prophet similar to Elijah, Israel's most famous prophet. He will turn people back to the Lord.



Zechariah questions the angel how this could happen, given the old age of his wife Elizabeth and the fact that she has never been able to conceive.

This seems a reasonable question to ask in the circumstances. But he is given no response other than his voice is muted and he can no longer speak.

So many gaps to fill in ... the angel accuses him of **disbelief** ... not believing this good news.

His wife has lived much of her life in **shame**, because she has no children.

Perhaps there is **silent grief** present as well, disappointment of a hope unfulfilled.

There may have been **anger** or **bitterness** at God for allowing all this to happen, especially when Zechariah and Elizabeth had been so devoted all their lives to observing the ways of God.

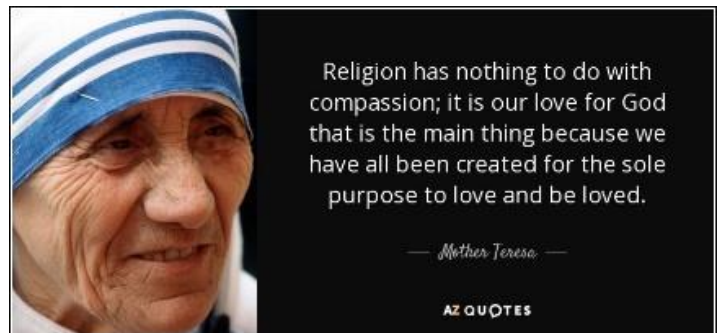
In some ways, Zechariah is **like Naomi** at the start of the book of Ruth. He is empty. God has let him down.

One question that I've been pondering this week is whether **religion** can starve us of a sense of adventure. Now religion with its many guidelines and teachings and routines can provide a really helpful framework for our lives, adding rhythm to our weekly schedule and showing us how to live a good and upright life.

But religion, surprisingly perhaps, can dwindle our relationship with God.

Jesus obviously thought so because he is more critical of religious people than any others.

Religion can take away our joy, take away our compassion, take away our humanity.



In one insightful parable, Jesus tells the story of a person who is attacked and left for dead on the side of the road. Two respected religious people see the person but ignore them because becoming involved will impact their ability to perform their religious duties at the temple. Only a foreigner, a Samaritan, stops to help the injured person.

God has a plan for Zechariah and Elizabeth, a plan to bless them both, and also to bless God's people Israel through their new son.

It will be a bold adventure for them as they grapple with being parents in their old age.

It will take them well out of their comfort zone.

Their son, John, a prophet, will directly challenge the religious people and their smug reliance on God ... which will be painful for them to hear.

The whole scenario will set tongues off wagging ... I thought they were such **respectable** people Now look what's happened! ... and they say this is all God's doing!

So coming at the end of two difficult years of Covid lockdowns and restrictions, are we ready for an adventure that could possibly take us beyond our comfort zone?

In some ways this is already well under way here at **Croydon North**, with the Tuesday meals program passing from Uniting back to the congregation in the middle of last year.

Could a small congregation take on such a large responsibility ... in the middle of a pandemic?

Just like in the Optus ads on TV with the little Hot Wheels cars, it all starts with 'yes' ... and the answer is a resounding 'yes'!



Hats off to Sue and Alan in particular – and to Jeanette and Stephen and YuJeong – with help also from Carole from Croydon and one or two friends – it's all worked amazingly well ... almost as if God had a plan ... with food from Second bite and a grant from Maroondah Council.

It's been a big exercise in trusting God to provide all that's needed.

But it's also been a big adventure!

Croydon, too, has several adventures under way at the moment, some of which have been going for many years, some more recent ... whether the Helping Hand program that has remained open and serving the community right through Covid, or the Playgroups which have been creative in finding new ways to keep in touch with families or indeed finding new ways for the congregation to remain connected through technology like Zoom.

And I wonder what else God may have in store for us next year if we are open to listening to God's Spirit and ready to take some risks and venture beyond where we are comfortable.

I want to finish with a quote from Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy as the older more experienced hobbit, Bilbo, tells his younger nephew, Frodo ...

It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door," he used to say. "You step into the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to."



Of course adventures can take you to places you really don't expect and involve pain and peril that you don't seek ... but that's all part of living an adventurous life that God calls us to.