

AWAITING THE ALREADY
Advent Worship Series – Week 3
The Ultimate Playlist
December 13, 2020
The Proclamation of Joy Candle

Lighting of Advent Candle

Reader 1: ⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9:6-7, NIV)

[Light first (purple) candle]

Reader 2: As we relight the candle of Preparation of Peace, we remember the voice crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord."

[Light second (purple) candle]

Reader 1: We relight the candle of the Expectation of Hope, recalling God's promise to send a Savior.

[Light third (pink) candle]

Reader 2: Now we light the candle of Revelation of Joy. May our hearts be forever filled with the joy of His coming.

Prayer: Father, we are filled with joy because we have hope and peace that you have sent your Son for all that believe. Help us to be the voices that proclaim grace and truth. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

The Power of Songs

Call to Worship:

The book of Luke is often the favorite Advent Gospel. It's the one that contains the stories we most often associate with the season. Luke is also unique in the manner of writing he brings to the Christmas story. He wrote with a song in his head. Nearly every major character in Luke's Nativity story breaks out into a song at some point.

Luke really loves his songs. And come to think of it, isn't that true of all of us?

How about you? Will you be open to the soul-stirring sounds of Christmas? Will you deafen the drones of deadlines and to-do lists, and listen for the glorious songs of angels in the sky?

(Awaiting the Already, pp. 47-49)

Zechariah: A Song from Silence

Choric Reading

Reader 1: Zechariah was an elderly priest who lived under the rule of King Herod. He and his wife Elizabeth were quite elderly and childless, despite their most earnest prayers. One day, as he was in the Temple performing his priestly work, the angel Gabriel came to him. ¹²Zechariah was shocked and afraid, ¹³but the messenger reassured him.

Messenger: Zechariah, calm down! Don't be afraid. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife is going to have a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴He will bring you great joy and happiness—and many will share your joy at John's birth. ¹⁶*Here is his mission:* he will turn many of the children of Israel around to follow the path to the Lord their God. ¹⁷Do you remember the prophecy about someone to come in the spirit and power of the prophet Elijah; someone who will turn the hearts of the parents back to their children; someone who will turn the hearts of the disobedient to the mind-set of the just and good? Your son is the one who will fulfill this prophecy: he will be the Lord's forerunner, the one who will prepare the people and make them ready for God.

Zachariah: ¹⁸How can I be sure of what you're telling me? I am an old man, and my wife is far past the normal age for women to bear children. *This is hard to believe!*

Messenger: *(sternly)* ¹⁹I am Gabriel, the messenger who inhabits God's presence. I was sent here to talk with you and bring you this good news. ²⁰Because you didn't

believe my message, you will not be able to talk—not another word—until you experience the fulfillment of my words.

Reader 1: Something happened to Zechariah over the next nine months. In the quiet of his own mind, he had time to reflect and think. It turns out that the silence from the angel was not a curse after all, but a remedy.

Reader 2: After the child was born, a disagreement arose over what the child’s name should be. A still mute Zechariah picked up a writing table and wrote the words, “His name is John,” just as the angel had told him. At that moment his voice was restored. Luke records an amazing song of praise that Zechariah offered to God.

Zachariah: ⁷⁶ And you, my son, will be called the prophet of the Most High. For you will be the one to prepare the way for the Lord ⁷⁷ so that the Lord’s people will receive knowledge of their freedom through the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸ All this will flow from the kind and compassionate mercy of our God. *A new day is dawning:* the Sunrise from the heavens will break through in our darkness, ⁷⁹ and those who huddle in night, those who sit in the shadow of death, *Will be able to rise* and walk in the light, guided in the pathway of peace.

(*Awaiting the Already*, pp. 49-52;
Luke 1:12-14, 16-19, 76-79, The Voice)

Mary: A Song of Obedience

Choric Reading

Reader 1: The second track on Luke’s Advent playlist is probably the most famous song in the entire New Testament. It is sung by the artist most often associated with the birth of Jesus, his own mother Mary.

Reader 2: Just as John the Baptist was a forerunner of Jesus, so it was with their mothers: Elizabeth was a forerunner of Mary. Elizabeth modeled for Mary what it meant to be both a recipient and a conduit of God’s miracle. She showed her that when one is blessed by God, one must be a blessing for others. That’s what Elizabeth became for Mary, so that Mary could become the same for the whole world.

Mary: ⁴⁶ My soul lifts up the Lord! ⁴⁷ My spirit celebrates God, my Liberator! ⁴⁸ For though I’m God’s humble servant, God has noticed me. Now and forever, I will be considered blessed by all generations.

Reader 1: But it doesn’t take long before there is a major shift in the content and focus of Mary’s song. After the first three verses, it becomes less about what God has done for Mary, and more about what God will do through Mary. The vessel has become a conduit:

Mary: ⁴⁹For the Mighty One has done great things for me; holy is God's name! ⁵⁰From generation to generation, God's lovingkindness endures for those who revere Him. ⁵¹God's arm has accomplished mighty deeds. The proud in mind and heart, God has sent away in disarray. ⁵²The rulers from their high positions of power, God has brought down low. And those who were humble and lowly, God has elevated with dignity. ⁵³The hungry—God has filled with fine food. The rich—God has dismissed with nothing in their hands. ⁵⁴To Israel, God's servant, God has given help, ⁵⁵as promised to our ancestors, remembering Abraham and his descendants in mercy forever.

Reader 1: For those of us who have been given the gift of Jesus Christ, we must then bear that gift for others in need. We can be an Elizabeth to the Marys around us, or a Mary to the world around us. We can be that gift of encouragement to others, so that God's blessing can flow through them as well.

(Awaiting the Already, pp. 53, 56-57;

Prayer:

Your plan of redemption was advanced when one simple peasant girl said yes to You—a yes that would change the world. There was no complicated ritual, nor advanced theological training involved. Just the trusting words, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Lord, may it be the same in my life. Help me to cooperate with Your plan for the world by saying yes to You. Even now, I say yes to You, Holy Spirit. Come upon me so that the life of Christ may be manifested through me to the needy world around me. Amen.

(Praise & Worship Bible, page 1372)

Sermon – Part 2 – Mary's Song

Angels: A Song of Joy

Reader 1: ⁸Nearby, in the fields outside of Bethlehem, a group of shepherds were guarding their flocks *from predators* in the darkness of night. ⁹Suddenly a messenger of the Lord stood in front of them, and the darkness was replaced by a glorious light— the shining light of God's glory. They were terrified!

Messenger: ¹⁰Don't be afraid! Listen! I bring good news, news of great joy, news that will affect all people everywhere. ¹¹Today, in the city of David, a Liberator has been born for you! He is the promised Anointed One, the Supreme Authority! ¹²You will know you have found Him when you see a baby, wrapped in a blanket, lying in a feeding trough.

Reader 2: ¹³At that moment, the first heavenly messenger was joined by thousands of other messengers—a vast heavenly choir. They praised God.

Heavenly Choir: ¹⁴To the highest heights of the universe, glory to God! And on earth, peace among all people who bring pleasure to God!

Reader 1: ¹⁵As soon as the heavenly messengers disappeared into heaven, the shepherds were buzzing with conversation.

Shepherds: Let's rush down to Bethlehem right now! Let's see what's happening! Let's experience what the Lord has told us about!

Reader 2: ¹⁶So they ran into town, and *eventually* they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the feeding trough. After they saw the baby, ¹⁷they spread the story of *what they had experienced and* what had been said to them about this child.

Reader 1: ¹⁸Everyone who heard their story couldn't stop thinking about its meaning. ¹⁹Mary, too, pondered all of these events, treasuring each memory in her heart.

Reader 2: ²⁰The shepherds returned *to their flocks*, praising God for all they had seen and heard, and they glorified God for the way the experience had unfolded just as the heavenly messenger had predicted.

Reader 1: The angel's song is full of marvel and spectacle. Even the key words of their song pop out like lights in the night sky: *Good News... Savior... Glory... Peace*. But notice how the song starts: "Don't be afraid" (Luke 2:10).

Reader 2: We now see that this phrase is a common theme for all of Luke's songs. For Zechariah, Mary, and now the shepherds, the first utterance of the angels to these Advent characters is a word of comfort in the midst of their fear.

Reader 1: For these shepherds, entrusted with the sole task of caring for their flock, this kind of threat—one that popped out of nowhere and rained down from the night sky—had to be downright terrifying. There was much to fear in that moment. Besides, these were shepherds, not soldiers. They were humble workers, not people of status or notoriety. There was much about their surrounding society that would make ordinary people fearful.

Reader 2: It was over against this dark night sky, that the angelic choir sang a melody that would echo for all eternity: "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors" (Luke 2:14).

Reader 1: Don't you think the world needs to hear a song of hope today?

(*Awaiting the Already*, pp. 57-58;
Luke 2:8-20, The Voice)

AWAITING THE ALREADY

Advent Children's Moment – Week 3

December 13, 2020

The Power of Songs by Martyn Scott Thomas

[Call the children of the congregation forward and have them sit around the Narrator's chair.]

Narrator: Today is the third week of Advent – the four weeks before Christmas. For the past few weeks we've been talking about different parts of the Christmas story. Last week, we talked about going away for Christmas. Today, we're going to talk about Christmas songs.

Who has a favorite Christmas song? *[get responses from the children]* Can you sing it for us? *[get responses from the children]* Anybody else? *[get responses from the children]* I have a feeling we could be here all day.

Do any of you know about anybody singing in the Bible when Jesus was born? *[get responses from the children]* Well the Bible tells us about a few songs that were sung. Most of us have heard about the angels singing to the shepherds to tell them about Jesus being born. But did you know that Mary, the mother of Jesus, sang a song when she learned that she would be his mother? It's called the Magnificat, which means 'my soul magnifies the Lord,' and can be found in Luke, chapter 1.

We also read in the Bible that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, sang a song about the birth of his son. So you see, there was a lot of singing happening around the birth of Jesus. So I guess it makes sense that we still sing songs about his birth at Christmas.

Let's pray. Dear Jesus, we thank you for all the songs of Christmas that remind us of your birth. Help us always to remember you as we sing. Bless us today. Amen.

I'll see you back here next week. *[dismiss the children]*

AWAITING THE ALREADY

Advent Sermon – Week 3
The Ultimate Playlist
December 13, 2020

By Captain Michael Sjögren

Title: *The Ultimate Playlist*

Scripture: Three portions from Luke 1 and 2

Zechariah's Song

Luke 1:5-25, 67-80

God regularly works through ordinary people and within the things that they might normally do. That's what we see here in the Christmas narrative, particularly in Luke's account.

I certainly know that we witness God working through ordinary people in our own contexts today. We could all testify to that, right? Often God uses those who may have mixed devotion to Him and partial faith of what God is asking or calling them to do. That could be my story this morning.

But today it's Zechariah's story. He and Elizabeth weren't expecting any of this. They were simply devout people who chose to live according to God's guidelines.

Zechariah was doing his regular duty as a priest. It was his turn to go to the Temple in Jerusalem, along with his division of priests, to perform the regular Temple liturgy. Familiar, you could say; probably even routine.

He was chosen by casting lots to go into the inner court, away from where other worshippers would be allowed to go, to offer incense. Sometimes our regular responsibilities in life provide a context for the extraordinary to happen! That's what takes place here.

Zechariah is visited in the inner court by Gabriel, God's sent messenger, who gives him an amazing and truly world-changing word. We see in Luke 1:12 that Zechariah is terrified by the sight of Gabriel. I think we could understand that—an unexpected visitor just popping up out of nowhere!

Gabriel's message changes Zechariah and Elizabeth's circumstances completely. First, they are going to have a son. They've been praying about it for years, and Elizabeth is way beyond child-bearing years. This is not the first time we have heard of this happening within scriptures.

Zechariah would be well aware of the other Old Testament miracles. Abraham and Sarah, Rachel giving birth to two sons after being childless, or the births of Samson and Samuel. God had done this before, but Zechariah's reaction doesn't include much faith that God can do it for them. Even though they have prayed for this, did they think it could really take place? Probably not in this way.

Remember, they are just ordinary people—not the true giants of faith that Zechariah had been teaching others about through the scriptures. Yet not only will they have a son, but that son will prepare the way for the coming Messiah! Yet another prophecy that Zechariah had also been studying and teaching others about, would be accomplished; they are going to be part of it! Gabriel says that this is truly “Good News” (v. 19).

It is still news that is hard to comprehend and difficult to accept. We see that Zechariah's lack of full faith had a consequence. Yes, God would still do this miracle work, and he still chose the ordinary Zechariah and Elizabeth to be John's parents, but Zechariah lost his ability to speak until after his son was born (v. 20).

There is a rather humorous situation after Gabriel's visit in verses 21-23 where Zechariah leaves the sanctuary and he has people waiting outside for him. He's trying to explain what took place in there but can only do so through hand gestures. I'm sure it was quite confusing for everyone!

But it happened. Elizabeth became pregnant and Zechariah had nine months to reflect on and prepare for what this miracle truly might mean. Starting in Luke 1:57, it tells us that their child is born and now it's time to name him. They are getting pressured by their friends and relatives to name him Zechariah after his father, but that is not God's will.

Zechariah writes down, “His name is John,” and at that moment his ability to speak returns. His immediate reaction is to praise God, and he breaks out into a poetic song. We see the heart of Zechariah in verses 68-79.

We can hear Zechariah's agony that he has felt for his people. One evil empire after another has ruled over God's chosen. At last there would be deliverance because God, who made a covenant

with Abraham, would now be sending the prophesied Messiah to offer salvation (v. 77); to offer freedom from oppression.

You see, this prophecy had been silent for many years, but now will burst out again and lead the people back to God. What started as a punishment for Zechariah became a magnificent sign that God would not be silent any longer but would now be doing a new thing.

Zechariah's child would prepare the way for the hope of Israel, the Messiah. He would lead his people out of darkness into light and would become the hope for the entire world. *"To give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God"* (Luke 1:77-78).

I encourage you to read through Zechariah's song, reflect upon it and worship through it this week. It's powerful and can bring you great hope, rest, and assurance for today. Zechariah and Elizabeth, two ordinary people who hesitated between faith and doubt. We can all relate to them as our faith stories reflect that as well.

God still chooses to use ordinary people for His purposes today, for His glory and for the furthering of His kingdom's work. Does your life song reflect on this faithfulness of God and the promises that He is working through us today? Let's be ready, let's be eager, and let's be obedient in looking for God to work through our ordinary—not afraid, but trusting in Him.

Mary's Song

Luke 1:46-55

When was the last time that a life experience brought you into true celebration? I'm not talking about just a flutter of excitement in the moment, but one where your response is maybe a little out of your ordinary. Maybe a bit wild or without reservation?

Have you ever found yourself doing a little dance or jig that just came out as a response to some news? Maybe a loud yell where you didn't really take into full consideration others around you? Have you ever just broken out into song?

We can—and should—read Mary’s Song (Luke 1:46-55) that way. It’s a response of celebration and praise as Mary is affirmed through Elizabeth, and by the leaping of John in Elizabeth’s womb, that God is doing a great miracle through her and that she will carry and deliver the Savior of the World, the promised Messiah.

She, too, is visited by Gabriel (v. 26). He is a busy angel! And Mary, like Zechariah, didn’t quite know how to accept the words of this messenger. Gabriel assured her, like he did Zechariah, that she should not be afraid (v. 30). Again, fear is a natural response to someone just popping up out of nowhere!

This message brought out great confusion in Mary. How could she become pregnant if she had not been with a man in that way? Also, what did Gabriel mean when he said, *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you”* (v. 35)? Mary, just an ordinary teenage girl whose reality is being altered—transformed totally!

But Gabriel says something to Mary in verse 36 that certainly gave her the faith and trust she needed to come to peace with all of this and say, *“I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled”* (v. 38). In verse 36, Gabriel knew that this news was going to be received with questionable ears and heart, so he reminds Mary that Elizabeth is already pregnant miraculously. God had already done an amazing thing for her, so if God can do that for Elizabeth, why can’t He do an extraordinary thing through Mary?

Elizabeth’s miracle pregnancy truly prepared Mary for her unexplainable pregnancy. Mary then visits Elizabeth, and it’s in this moment that Mary’s true joy and celebration bursts out. Mary’s response, her song, is one of the most famous within Christianity. It’s often called the “Magnificat” because that is the Latin word for the phrase Mary starts her song with, *“My soul magnifies the Lord”* (v. 46).

N.T. Wright speaks of Mary’s celebration response: “It’s the gospel before the gospel, a fierce bright shout of triumph thirty weeks before Bethlehem, thirty years before Calvary and Easter. It goes with a swing and a clap and a stomp. It’s all about God and it’s all because of Jesus.”

Mary and Elizabeth shared a moment of true celebration. They celebrated the understanding that what God was doing through them would begin the fulfilment of God’s promises. Yes, all nations would be blessed through Abraham’s family.

Mary and Elizabeth, like so many other Jews of their time, were taught the scriptures that spoke about mercy, hope, fulfilment, victory and that God would come to the rescue. And Mary's song reflects that anticipation.

Almost every word is a biblical quotation and echoes the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, in which Hannah celebrated what God was going to do through the birth of Samuel.

Elizabeth and Mary are celebrating what God is going to do through their sons John and Jesus. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months and then returned to her home (v. 56). I'm sure they had many more conversations and moments discussing what God was doing through two ordinary women; two women blessed and highly favored by God.

I hope that through Mary's song we, too, can realize afresh today that God is the reason to celebrate. God sent us His Son to bring salvation and freedom and hope to this broken world. He loves us that much and our response should continually be a song of worship, with a heart ready to celebrate, and that our lives *can* be an example to others that God redeems, restores and saves. *"For the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name"* (v. 49).

The Angels' Song

Luke 2:8-15

God regularly works through ordinary people and within the things that they might normally do. Have you caught that yet? Connected with that yet? Now we have the song of the angels, the full announcement that the Savior has been born. He has come and the world will never be the same!

Here's a beautiful and powerful aspect of this portion: It's the first time this news is given to a group of people beyond those who were directly involved (like Zechariah, Mary and Joseph); it goes out to the most common, ordinary group of people within that culture—Shepherds.

This news was not announced to the priests at the Temple; the powerful politicians of that day were not visited by this angelic choir. Not even the entire city of Jerusalem or even Bethlehem received the word. No, it was given on a hillside to a group of people that were just doing their ordinary thing. This was a group that the larger society viewed as lower class and didn't even have some of the same rights as other citizens.

But God knows their value because He created them and He willed that they were the first to hear that salvation was now available to all—because the Savior has come; He is Christ the Lord!

The shepherds became part of the celebration. They were the first to visit the Messiah, the Lamb of God, and worship Him.

Luke chapter 2 is the staple scripture of the Christmas season. It's even hard to read it or hear it without thinking of Linus van Pelt proclaiming it beautifully in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. It's the Nativity story we all know so well.

But there are still fresh aspects we can learn and grow from, even with a portion so often heard. For instance, one thing we shouldn't overlook is what the angel first said to the shepherds as He appeared out of nowhere in front of them in the sky. Can you guess? *"Do not be afraid"* (Luke 2:10). Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

It's the third time we've heard it today. The same message given to Zechariah, Mary and now the shepherds. Let's stop and reflect on that. Why do you need to hear it three times today? What is God speaking into your heart right now that you need to turn toward Him? Do you need to give Him the fear within "that" and begin to trust Him even more? (*pause*)

In both Zechariah's and Mary's song, we've seen the hope that God's covenant, His promises, would be fulfilled. That God would intervene with His people and bring deliverance. We've talked briefly about it but it's important to understand that Christ came while things were not so hopeful for His people. That's the backdrop of the dark sky before the angels appeared and lit it up.

There was the oppressive reign of the Roman government, heavy taxation, and a forced census. Generations had experienced the ruling empires of the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. There were centuries of longing for freedom and liberation; an anticipation of the Messiah.

It was in this reality that the angels broke through the dark sky and the light appeared with "Good News." *"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests"* (v. 14). This melodic song has echoed into eternity.

These three songs we've looked at provide strength and hope for souls in the midst of suffering and fear. We as the church have the message—the song of hope, the Savior has come and love is triumphant!

We have the copyright to this song, a truth that this broken world needs to hear. We hold the music score and the title of it is, "Christ Jesus."

It's a holy calling, this victorious song, and one that the church needs to continually perform. But it first must be our individual song before we can join the corporate song. It's the ordinary, redeemed people singing this song in the ordinary circumstances of our lives, and it makes an eternal impact.