

Selected Sermons #1

The Festival Half of the Church Year by E. Schaller

LUKE 1:5-22 1st Sunday in Advent

In the time of Herod king 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 upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

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 worshipers were praying outside.

Then the 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 give him the name 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 from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back 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 fathers 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 an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

The angel answered, “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 proper 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 realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

Dear Christian and Christmas friends -

To be unprepared for the coming of Christmas is a condition which even those to whom Christmas means little more than a holiday would avoid. If you go into the streets and stores at this season, you will know what I

mean. Men, women, and children in throngs press against counters and show-cases while mothers at home are getting out the cookie recipes and making shopping lists. Newspapers are continually reminding us that there are only so-and-so many days left before Christmas. The whole idea is one of timely preparation, and no one thinks it strange that such a preparatory season is felt necessary each year. Can those, then, who intend to observe a real, spiritual Christmas, with heart and home bedecked and ready to receive the dear Lord, afford to be any less exact in requiring and diligently using a time of preparation? Christmas has never come upon the world suddenly, not even the very first Christmas. The greatest event since Creation needed to be met by a people prepared.

Months before Christmas night, a man-child was born in the hills of Judaea, a child who by his very name and by the strange circumstances of his birth aroused the land of Israel from spiritual sleep, even as he later made the valleys of the Jordan ring with his preaching. And thus, ever since the Church began to celebrate Christmas, it has observed a season of preparation – so marking the beginning of a new Church Year that it falls not on Christmas but four weeks earlier. So then, this Advent season upon which we embark today, is for our preparation. Will we regard it merely as a custom, or will

we feel it needful? Before answering, let us turn to the evidence presented in the first Advent gospel before us and consider the words of the angel Gabriel who announced -

**A season of preparation to make
ready a people prepared for the Lord.**

I. From Zacharias we learn the need

**II. From the angel we learn how a prepared
people is made ready**

I. May those who feel that four weeks of preparation for Christmas serve no real need, who believe that they are always prepared in heart and mind, go back with me to the days of which St. Luke so beautifully tells, when the world was ripe and ready for the coming of the Savior. The fullness of time had come; the ancient promises of God were ready to bear fruit in the birth of God's Son, yet the people were not prepared for the Lord, not even the very best of God's children. Of those who still had to be made ready, we find the father of John the Baptist.

Zacharias was in every sense one of the best of God's people. Many a humble shepherd or carpenter in Israel might have envied him for his place so near to God, for Zacharias was a priest. His was the noblest occupation known in the land; his was the task of bringing and

keeping men in touch with their Lord. How much more must not he have been near the true God! Although his active service in the temple was limited to the two weeks in a year in which the group of priests to which he belonged took over the duties of the priesthood, yet even his home was a tiny temple where his wife Elizabeth – in whose veins also flowed the blood of the first great priest Aaron – joined him in daily prayers and devotion.

Moreover, Zacharias was an old priest. He had grown old in God's service and could not be called a novice. No secret of God's gracious revelation was unknown to him. He understood the meaning of the many sacrifices; he knew that God was leading his people to a glorious day of a new kingdom.

Surely it is true that the office of priest did not itself entitle Zacharias to be numbered among the best of God's people, for we read of him that *he was righteous before God, walking in all the commandments blameless*. We are not strangers to the Bible truth that when God calls a man righteous, it means one thing and one thing only – it means that God had declared him righteous, as it was written of Abraham, *“Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness”* (Galatians 3:6) Zacharias was righteous by faith, believing the Word and promises of God. Though a sinner as all men are,

Zacharias trusted in the Savior who was to come; that made him a child of God, and he walked according to it in a God-fearing life.

So the striking hour of God's new church year, the dawn of the New Testament, found Zacharias, a good child of God, at the most favorable moment, for the old priest was at service in the temple. Yes, and for perhaps the first and only time in his long life he was privileged to perform that **priestly duty which belonged to the highest** of the many tasks that the temple-service required – namely, leading the hour of prayer by officiating at the altar of incense. There it happened, and can we say that Zacharias was not ready? Might he not have been fully prepared even to welcome not only the coming of his great son, but the birth of the Christ-child?

It does matter what we would say; the facts are before us. **Zacharias was not ready for the Lord.** Consider the evidence. It would not be enough to say that Zacharias was frightened when there on his left beside the altar the mighty figure of an angel suddenly stood. To be frightened was what we might expect, for angels do not appear every day even to a priest, and to be alone and find that one is not alone is startling – but Luke writes that Zacharias was *troubled, and fear fell upon him*. That was something else than mere fright. This child of God, old though he was and

used to dealing with heavenly things, when heaven suddenly stood before his eyes, he received a terrible shock. Why?

The meaning and the reason for the old priest's fear are quickly revealed. Just see how the story unfolds itself. Gabriel the heavenly messenger announces to Zacharias the miracle that his aged wife will bear a son. Actually this good news turns out to be the least important part of the message, for from the angel's lips now fall words of strange beauty which Zacharias might have clutched to his heart like old, familiar friends. *You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord . . . He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit. . . He will also go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah.* Here the old, old promises come to life, the promises Zacharias knew so well, on which his faith rested. Elijah would come, the prophets had said – the forerunner of the Savior to prepare his way – and now the fulfillment of all of this was pouring itself out before the aged priest.

But he believed it not. The time for Christ had come, but **Zacharias was not ready for it.** His son, the second Elijah, was but a few months away, and the first person that needed him was his own father. No wonder Zacharias saw troubled and full of fear! Though he was a

child of God, look how through the years unbelief and doubt nourished by a sinful heart had grown and crusted upon him! So serious is his plight indeed that God must take hold of him roughly. For a long season Zacharias' voice is stopped completely; his priestly duties for others must cease; he cannot even bless his people until he himself has experienced that thorough preparation of heart and soul by which he can receive first his own son, and through him the Christ-child.

Is it necessary, then, "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord"? Have we reason to set aside the season of Advent as such who are not ready to welcome our Christ-child's birth? Although John is no longer the great Elijah in our midst, yet there is need among us of such work as his, for we are no better than the best and we are quite naturally afflicted as Zacharias was.

It is but a year since last we rejoiced in the holy night of Christ's birth; nothing has changed in our relation to God; we are still his children; we still love his Son – but if suddenly this day an angel stood before us, we would notice quite well what a crust the deadening influence of the world and our own sin has left upon us. Our hearts have grown callous; our worries and earthly concerns have glutted the taste of our faith, so that the sharp sweetness

of the Christmas message will leave us unsatisfied. Like Zacharias, we are not worthy even to speak the glad tidings to others, to offer one another the peace of Christ – until in a season of repentance and preparation we have rid ourselves of doubts, indifference, dead works, and cold love. Now is the time for that, and needful time!

II. Therefore let us now learn from the angel how a prepared people is made ready. In describing the work of the Savior's forerunner, Gabriel spoke in this wise, *"And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

We understand the difficult task that confronts every effort of those who would prepare hearts for Christmas. Not only does the human heart gather unto itself doubts and sins, dead works, and indifference to spiritual things, but it also clings to the old things, hating to give them up. This we see all the time in very respect. The older people get, the more desperately they cling to old ideas, the ideas of their fathers and to old ways, even though the new is better. Hearts cling to old mistakes and to old sins as well. We humans cling to old joys; do not our hearts love to linger in the memories of the past? How often we hear the

elders among us speak of the “*good old days*” as the better days, and sometimes even of the “*old country*” as a much better country.

This weakness of the human heart may be excusable and harmless in many respects; perhaps sometimes the old ways were better – but in spiritual things it is a dangerous weakness, and the work of preparing a people for the Lord is a struggle against it.

So it was that John the Baptist was commissioned in that first Advent season to *turn the hearts of the fathers to the children from the old to the new*. Zacharias had lived long; he had lived in the Old Testament; so had all his fellow Israelites. They had learned to know and love the days of the old Covenant with its promises and its waiting for the Lord. Now that Covenant was worn out; it was not the best, and it had to go. Israel had to leave the old and turn to the new day that was dawning, in which their children would live and rejoice. Yes, Christmas is for children and for children’s hearts. **To make us ready for it is to become as our children** and to turn to the holy event as though it were something ever new, for it is! The grace of God that brought salvation becomes like a new thing each Christmas, compelling us to lay off the old and to smooth out the wrinkles that have settled upon our faith and joy.

Such a change is not wrought through mere good intentions, for what holds us from always having the joy of children and the faith of children in finding in our Lord and Christ each day a new and blessed treasure? It is the disobedience of sin, the contrary nature of our flesh and its lust. **Therefore a ready people must be *turned from disobedience to wisdom*, the true wisdom of the justified child of God.** By hearing the sharp preaching of the Law, the world of John's day was directed to *repentance*, and then they found the *wisdom* of the Lamb of God which came among them. Thus, as the angel promised, many rejoiced at John's birth because he was to enable them to prepare for Christ's coming.

May God grant that we enjoy this season and use it fully! The angel will declare it to ears in this church, and the Word of the Lord will enter Christian hearts in this assembly. Let us prepare in such a manner for the heavenly Gift! Amen!

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