**ADVENT 221, FAITHFULLY PREPARING THE WAY, IS. 40:3-5, LK. 1:1-10, 57-80, DEC. 5/21.**

Last week, the 1st week of Advent, we explored **the hope of the prophets,** looking at some significant prophesies concerning the promises of the coming Messiah. In Gen 1 we heard we’re created in the “image of God”, that God has given us a very high calling. In Lev. He told us to be holy because He is holy. Yet we realized we’ve all fallen short of the mark God sets out for us. We need some**one** to stand in for us who is without sin. That someone is Jesus Christ, who God promised to send as early as the time of Moses. Is. (7) confirmed that “the virgin will be with child & will give birth to a son & will call him Immanuel—God with us”. While it seemed abrupt to us, to the Jews, such a prophecy was their dearest hope. **The Child**, Israel’s hope, will be coming into the world! The prophet Micah confirmed He’d be born in Bethlehem. Finally, Malachi, confirmed God would send a messenger who’d prepare the way before the Lord.

 **Although the prophets were quiet—meaning God was quiet—for 400 years between Micah’s prophecy & Christ’s birth, still the people were waiting expectantly for Messiah**. The long genealogy beginning Matthew’s Gospel was broken into 3 segments: from Abraham to David, from David to the exile to Babylon & from the exile to the time of Christ, corresponding to the building of Israel as a powerhouse nation, followed by a fall into shame & slavery & tragedy. Finally, Jesus appears to liberate His people from their shame & slavery, turning their tragedy into triumph. Put another way **humanity went from greatness made in the image of God, to slaves of sin rather than the servants of God we were intended to be. Finally our greatness was retrieved, not by us, but by God, who didn’t abandon us when we strayed. He sent Jesus into our broken world to rescue us from our mess, restoring us to fellowship with God.**

 Jesus was called the Son of David because the Jews never forgot their destiny: they were God’s chosen people. Jesus would fulfil their hope for peace, loveliness & greatness. In Mt. **Jes us is the fulfillment of prophecy. We see there’s purpose & design in this universe. Life & the world are moving toward the goal of God!** **The Child is coming; He’ll be called Jesus, because He’ll save His people from their sins. God will be with us. He’s established an appointment with each of us, from the beginning.**

 Malachi said, “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come…See I will send you the prophet Elijah…”

 Jesus, in His adult ministry, confirmed that Elijah had already come. That Elijah was in fact John the Baptist, so it is the Baptist who prepared the way for the Lord.

 Zechariah & Elizabeth, the Baptist’s parents, exemplify the high expectations God has for His people. “Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments & regulations blamelessly.” Nevertheless, they were childless. In those days that could be grounds for divorce. Zechariah & Elizabeth prayed constantly about that, though it appeared to be an unfulfillable prayer, given Elizabeth & Zechariah’s advanced years.

 Still, God chose Zechariah. He was chosen by lot, a custom among the priests, to go into the temple of the Lord & burn incense—a very high honour that most of the 20,000 priests in the Promised Land never got to do. And then, the most unexpected happened: an angel of the Lord appeared to him in the inner temple, the Holy of Holies. Zechariah was gripped with fear & the words we hear so many times from God followed:

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, & you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy & a delight to you, & many will rejoice because of his birth.”

God speaks to each of us: “Do not be afraid”. How often each of us needs to be reminded that God is with us & we need not be afraid in any circumstances. We’re also reminded that our children are to be a joy & a delight to us; they are a gift from God.

 John would be great in the sight of the Lord. He was filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. And his mission? He would bring back many people to the Lord.

“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—**making ready a people prepared for the Lord**.”

Any good parent knows you’ve got to prepare your children for the unexpected. It may be a warning that bed will be in 5 minutes, that tomorrow we’ll do such & such, that they need to be ready for bad people when they least expect it, so you street-proof them. Any good tea-cher knows that students need to be prepared—prepared for tests, prepared to get to work on assignments, prepared to go successfully into the world of work and so forth.

Similarly, **God knows that we need to be prepared for God coming into the world. Are you ready for that? Are you prepared?** I’m reminded of the elderly black lady in the American deep south who was sitting on her veranda being harangued by several boys passing by who were bent on trouble. “Hey, lady, you’d better go & get ready for your Jesus, cuz He’s comin’.” Without missing a beat, she responded, “Boys, I’z not gettin’ ready, I’z keepin’ ready.” And to be clear, preparing doesn’t mean getting the turkey ready, or doing the Christmas shopping or writing &mailing Christmas cards or any of the other 1,000 things that can preoccupy us at Christmas. **You see, it’s not the activity that is the preparation for God’s coming; it’s the heart behind the activity. The real question is “how’s your heart?”** Is it overflowing with gratitude to God for what He’s done? Does that spill over into loving kindness for others with gentle speech (including those who you don’t feel so warmly towards) & intentional actions of grace & caring for others, before yourself? **Are you at peace with God & every one of His people?**

John the Baptist came into the world as

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him…The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth, & all humanity will see God’s salvation.”

**Are you keeping your paths to the Lord straight, smooth and completely uncluttered?** This will be your peace that we are focusing on during this 2nd Sunday of Advent. Don’t be so distracted about the small details of Christmas Day that you miss the big picture & miss the Prince of Peace altogether, for who He is & why He’ come. It’s like preparing for a guest so long that she arrives & leaves & you’ve never gotten out of the kitchen to see or share with him/her.

Zechariah is a lot like us. He doubts God’s message delivered by the angel Gabriel. How can he be sure of the message, especially when he & Elizabeth are so old? Gabriel came to bring God’s good news. Because he didn’t believe it, Zechariah became mute until John’s birth.

Elizabeth’s neighbours & friends shared her joy at the birth of her son. At his circumcis-ion ceremony, everyone thought he’d be named after his father, but Elizabeth insisted his name would be John, meaning “God is gracious”, expressing his parents’ great joy & gratitude. At that Zechariah’s voice returned & he immediately began praising God. God’s hand was on this child!

And it is so with us. As we raise our children in the fear & admonition of the Lord, His hand is with us & our children. At times we don’t see it, at times we forget it or ignore it. Sometimes we wonder how our children or we ourselves have wandered from God. **Make straight the way of the Lord and He will guide your steps and those of your children.**

As Zechariah prophesied he said that God

“has come & has redeemed His people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David (as He said through His holy prophets of long ago).”

 Did you notice? Zechariah put all of this in the past tense, even though Christ hadn’t yet been born. It is a done deal! God’s always been about redemption. He’s had a redemptive plan for you & me right from the beginning. Aren’t you in awe of a God who’s had you in the centre of His plans for eternity before you were born? **All of redemptive history hangs on the swing-ing doors of a Bethlehem stable, even before it ever happened—& ever since it happened.**

Listen to what else the Saviour will accomplish according to Zech’s song. Jesus will deliv-er us from our enemies, He’ll show mercy to our fathers, remember the covenant He swore to Abraham, enable us to serve Him in holiness & righteousness without fear. Now that is peace!

John will be called a prophet of the Most High, who will go before Jesus, preparing the way for Him, to give people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, listen, “because of the tender mercy of our God…to shine on those living in darkness…and to guide our feet into the path of peace.” **Jesus brings light into our darkness; Jesus is our peace.**

Let’s sum up here. **1st, all life is a preparation to lead us to Christ. God is working all things together to bring us to Him. 2nd,** Jesus has come to tell us that God is love; **He reveals who God the Father is**. **3rd**, with Christ there is forgiveness, & **forgiveness enables the restor-ation of relationship with God**, not just the removal of some penalty for wrongdoing; estrange-ment with God is turned to friendship. **4th** and finally, preparation for God’s coming means walking in the way of peace. And this is **not merely staying away from trouble; it involves all that makes for a person’s highest good. That is walking in the way of life, not death**.

John the Baptist taught us about being prepared for the Lord’s coming. He was always humble. He never took praise that was rightly to be given to Christ. All his life was directed to lifting up Jesus. In John 3, he says openly, **Jesus “must become greater; I must become less.”**

**This is the key to the Gospel & the key to life. We will be right with God if we seek to make Christ greater & make ourselves less. This Christ Child is the object of our faith, the ob-ject of our life, the purpose for which we’ve been born, for whom & by whom we’ve been created. Most amazingly, as we exalt Him, ironically, He builds us up & gives us His peace. Peace, like hope is a gift from God. No God, no peace; know God, know peace!**

Will you strive to see God greater and yourself less this week?

Do you know that peace today? If not you can ask Jesus to give you that peace. Remarkably, He’ll say “yes” & work wonders in your heart. That’s real preparation for Christ’s coming.