

“Imagine: Prayers & Prophecies Fulfilled” (Advent Week 1)
(Luke 1:1-25, 57-80)

- **Christmas vs. Advent**

- *Imagine Christmas*...what comes to mind? What do you envision, what do you feel? We tend to emphasize all the fun stuff, which is wonderful—I love Christmas, and I’m married to someone who *really, really loves Christmas!* But holidays come with a *wide range* of emotions and experiences. None more than Christmas. You may imagine the magical Christmas dinner, the ornaments from all those family vacations, the icicle lights hanging from the roof, the perfect gifts you skillfully interrogated your family members for. *But* you might also be thinking of the strained family relationships you’re forced to confront each Christmas, the empty seat at the table and the grief that gets amplified at holidays, the financial strain that catches you in traps of comparison and pressure, the melancholy of Christmases long-gone you wish you could relive. Sometimes, we’re just trying to keep up with the chaotic pace of the world. When some imagine Christmas, they think of the craziness of normal life, *but worse: more stress, more busyness, more bills, more expectations to keep up with, more social pressures and family dynamics.* “Happy Holidays!” (*Really? Are people actually happy, or is Amazon just trying to get us to buy stuff...*)
- If *any* of this resonates with you when it comes to Christmas, even a little, then I’d like you to imagine something else this morning: **Imagine this Christmas was different.** Imagine moving through this season in a way you never have before—taking the “crazy” out of Christmas, putting the “holy” back in *holidays*. What if every decoration, every tradition, every celebration was about *re-enchanting* our imaginations to appreciate the sacredness of ordinary life, *reorienting* us to the reality of Heaven in our midst, *retuning* our hearts to beat in time with God’s, *re-rooting* our lives in the unshakable Kingdom of God and His great Story?
 - This is what *Advent* is meant to be. “**Advent**” is a season Christians have observed since the early centuries of the Church. It **comes from the Latin word “Adventus” which means arrival.** Most of us today think of Advent as just a “countdown to Christmas”—but it’s much more. Let me tell you 2 things that will *completely change* your perspective of this season if you’ve never thought about them. First: **Advent is meant to be to Christmas, what Lent is to Easter.** Let that sink in. Advent is actually a *penitential season* in the Church year: it’s meant to be a slowing-down time of **reflection, repentance, fasting, preparation**, that gets us ready for the *feast* of Christmas. Some people call Advent “little lent.” Second: Advent isn’t just about remembering the *first coming* of Jesus’ birth—**Advent is about anticipating and preparing for Jesus’ second coming**, His future “arrival.” Christians are invited to launch into each new year with a *heart-searching-season* of asking, *Am I ready for Jesus’ return?* That’ll definitely motivate you to repent, fast, and pray, how about it?
- But that doesn’t mean it’s a *sad* season, just the opposite: if you understand what the return of Jesus means—the end of all things broken, and the beginning of all things made new—then Advent will lead you to immense *hope, peace, joy, and love*—even if you’re in a time of darkness. Imagine if this Advent season, your soul

slowed down, and your life was marked by sacred rhythms of *grace*. To do that, we have to remember, *to imagine*, where it all began. That's what we're going to do together, using the Christmas stories in the Gospel of Luke. Today, we're looking at the very beginning, *when so many prayers and prophecies were fulfilled*. Let's pray...

- **Promises and Prophecies Fulfilled**

- **Imagine the time before Christ arrived:** our Old Testament ends with Malachi preparing people for the Day of the Lord, when God will come to “clean house” and make things right. He predicts the coming of a figure like the great prophet Elijah, who will get them ready for the Lord. And then, *there was silence*. For four hundred years, the prophecies grew silent, messengers from heaven stopped showing up, and God's people waited. Meanwhile, the world was *very noisy*: Israel endured the violent shifting of empires all around them: from Babylon, to Persia, to Greece, to *Rome*. Many would-be Messiahs rose up to fight off their oppressors; all of them died, and the waiting wore on. The whisper, became a hush, the hush became a groan—like their ancestors in Egypt, they groaned for deliverance. God promised that a Savior would come. But how long can you wait for a promise to be fulfilled before the waiting turns to forgetting?
- Into this environment, heaven finally broke the silence. Luke begins the story of Jesus' arrival with a faithful husband and wife—not Mary and Joseph—but a much lesser-known couple, who paved the way: ***“In the time of Herod the king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendent 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 unable to conceive, and they were both very old.” (Luke 1:5-7)***
 - Elizabeth and Zechariah: a faithful, godly couple. They had done everything right; and yet their lives were marked by sorrow. They never had children as their hearts desired, and now they were old. Still, they did their duty and served God faithfully. Zechariah was chosen to fulfill his priestly role in the temple: he got the once-in-a-lifetime privilege to go into the holy sanctuary, right outside the Holy of Holies, to burn incense to the Lord during the hour of prayer.
- It was a special moment; but Zechariah never imagined what would happen next: ***“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...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.’” (1:11-17)***
 - Well, that's a lot to take in! Zechariah was probably thinking, *“I'm too old for this!”* “Angel” in the New Testament literally means “messenger”—and almost every time an angel shows up, they have to say, *“Don't be afraid!”* because when a messenger from the unseen realm, a servant of the Most High God, a warrior of

light, becomes visible to us, *that's scary!* And if that wasn't enough, he tells Zechariah, after they've *long forgotten their prayers* for a child, that they're becoming parents in their old age. This child isn't just anyone—he's the one Malachi and Isaiah predicted: *the one who would come to prepare the way of the Lord!* This is John the Baptist.

- It's all too much! Zechariah is a godly man, but he can't bring himself to trust this announcement. His first response to the angel is, "*How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.*" This is a priest here! He knows the stories of Israel, about Abraham and Sarah, and all the wonderful works of God. He knows what's possible with God. But when an angel from heaven shows up to give him a message, he falters. He had waited so long, maybe he had started to forget.
- **"Then 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 unable to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.'" (Luke 1:19-20)** You want a sign? I'll give you a sign: you're not going to be able to speak another word until this word I gave you comes to pass—that's how you're going to know that God means what He says! Now, maybe there are some wives out there who would really appreciate 9 months of silence, where their husbands couldn't say anything to them, but I digress.
- Let's see how Elizabeth responds: **"After this, 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 favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.'" (1:24-25)** This is such a sensitive, painful thing, for anyone at any time—I know it's close to home for so many. You may feel like you carry that burden alone, but you are seen, and you are loved. In Elizabeth's day, many people believed that childlessness was a sign that God had not given his favor, that you had done something wrong. This was a very painful plight. Even though they were faithful people, Elizabeth experienced a sense of disgrace.
- When our prayers seem unanswered, our longings go unmet, it's so very easy for us to assume, *I must have done something wrong.* God is very patient to let us discover the fullness of His grace even in the midst of our grief. And we have a choice in every disappointment, to turn away in despair, or to keep faithfully choosing God's way.
 - Elizabeth and Zechariah kept walking with the Lord in spite of their sorrow. They weren't perfect, but they were faithful to God's ways, and His favor was with them—even though they couldn't always see it. Once God surprised them with this incredible role they'd been chosen for—to be the parents of the forerunner of the Messiah—they went into a season of *silence* and *solitude*. Zechariah couldn't speak, and Elizabeth went into seclusion. Both of them quietly prepared for God's promise to come to pass.
- **Waiting is Never Wasted**
 - **Silence, Solitude, Waiting.** These are good words for Advent. This is a good story for Advent. Elizabeth and Zechariah *waited*, with longing, with pain, with weariness, and yet in faithfulness. And after it seemed like their hope was over,

God showed up, and God moved. Their waiting was much like the waiting of all Israel, in those 400 years of silence—with pain, with weariness, wondering if their hope was in vain. But then, God showed up, and God moved.

- Elizabeth and Zechariah discovered that God had not answered their prayers in the way or the time they'd hoped, because God's plans for them were a lot bigger than the plans they had for themselves. The answer to their long-forgotten prayer turned out to be part of the fulfillment of the prayers and prophecies that God's people had been waiting on for centuries.
- If you will fully yield yourself to the Lord, and walk with Him in faithfulness, you will find that your life still has disappointments. You'll wonder sometimes why something happens, or doesn't happen, the way you think it should. But sometimes, God doesn't answer our prayers in the way or the time you expect, because *His plans* for your life are *bigger than yours are*. When all is finished, we'll see that *God's plan really is greater than anything we could have imagined*.
- But in order to get there, *we have to be willing to wait*. Advent reminds us that with God, waiting is never wasted. Because our God is a redeemer. And our God is a promise keeper. We have the benefit of looking back, and seeing how *all of this was fulfilled after all the waiting and trials* God's people had to endure. And because Jesus came then—we can know that every promise of God that we're still waiting on is sure. Guaranteed.
- Do you know what happened when Zechariah finally got his voice back? The moment the baby was born, and they named him John, his voice returned, he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he broke out into prophetic praise to the God who keeps His promises and redeems His people. His song ends with these amazing words: ***“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.” (Luke 1:78-79 NRSV)***
- Those are Advent words right there. We're living in the light of that dawn today, the Light of Jesus Christ. *Imagine all that we're going to experience with God if we just wait on His promises—all that He's going to do, in this life, and in the life to come. Just imagine.* Let's make this Christmas different. Let's take time every day to wait in wonder on the great promises of God. And what better way to enter into this journey than to come to the Lord's Table, where we see the fulfillment of all the promises, the culmination of God's redemption plan that began with the birth of Christ? Let's pray.