Light of the World
A Beginner's Guide to Advent

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LIGHT *of the* WORLD

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE to ADVENT

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INTRODUCTION

"You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven."

Matthew 5:14, 16

Jesus spoke to the people again, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me won't walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

John 8:12

I love Christmas. When I was a child, I sang Christmas carols in the public schools in North Dartmouth, Massachusetts, and to this day, in the car, or in the shower, or sometimes in the hallways of Vanderbilt Divinity School, I'll find myself humming "pa rum pa pum pum" or "fa la la la la." I did on occasion get the lyrics wrong: "Later on, we'll perspire, as we sit, by the fire" is comprehensible, but not quite right. My mother told me that I used to cry when I heard "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer"; that the other reindeer would not play with him remains distressing to me.

When I was very little, I thought of Christmas as about tinsel and toys, candy canes and poinsettia plants. Seeing decorated trees inside people's homes, I'd think to myself, "Christians live here."

Houses that had lights on the outside indicated that the people inside were "really Christian." Somehow I got the impression that all these decorations were designed to make Jewish people happy. They certainly made me happy. They still do.

I also knew Christmas had something to do with a baby lying on straw and a pretty lady with a veil; there were some men in fancy bathrobes and crowns and other men in plain bathrobes with towels on their heads, and there was a donkey. But the story itself remained a mystery to me. I learned a little from the 1965 *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, in which Linus reads the story of the shepherds and the angels from Luke 2:8-14. The ending, from the King James Version, is the familiar (but not necessarily correct) translation from the Greek, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (2:14). I liked the idea, but I did wonder what "peace on earth" had to do with Santa Claus, elves, or that donkey.

I still love Christmas, but now I appreciate not only the decorated tree but also the fruits the good trees bear. There is more beauty to Advent than Christmas music and artistic depictions of Madonna and Child. There is more value to the joy the season brings and the hopes it raises when we recognize the fascinating, rich, and provocative aspects of the stories of Jesus' birth.

Knowing the historical context of Linus's citation matters, as does recognizing how references to angels and shepherds in Luke 2:8-14 would have been heard two thousand years ago. How much more profound does the text read when we discover that, beneath the expression "good tidings of great joy," is the word for *Gospel*, *euangelion*, literally, "good news." The import of the text is enhanced when we see how mentions of the "city of David" and of King David himself are essential to the good news and when we see how divine rule and earthly peace are connected.

The more I read the Nativity stories in Matthew and Luke, the more drawn in I am; each sentence, each word, shimmers with significance—with allusions to Jewish texts and Roman history, with connections to other words and stories in the Gospels, and with multiple meanings for the present, about birth and death, youth and aging, taxation and immigration, revelation and hope—for any reader who opens the book. Each time I read these texts, I see something new; therefore, each time I read the texts, they still speak to me.

Knowing the history also helps us realize that Christmas is so much more than a children's holiday. I know a number of people who concluded that "Santa isn't real" and then leapt to the conclusion that the Christmas stories—of angelic appearances and prescient dreams, miraculous conceptions and stars that function like a GPS—are superstitious nonsense. Thus, they dismiss the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke; they relegate the Advent messages to the space next to the elf on the shelf (not to be confused with Hanukkah's "mensch on a bench") where the Gospel chapters gather dust alongside the little drummer boy, the manger in the snow globe, and "Olive, the other reindeer."

I've met far too many people, and in this case one person is too many, who have left the church because they could not "believe" the Christmas stories. Still others, noticing discrepancies in the narratives—Matthew has Magi, and Luke has shepherds; Matthew locates Joseph and Mary in their home in Bethlehem, and Luke has the birth in a stable; the genealogies of Joseph disagree, and so on—conclude that both accounts are untrustworthy.

The problem in each case is one of category confusion. Those who dismiss Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 as mythological drivel have read the texts incorrectly. Matthew and Luke are not writing for children, and the stories are anything but childish. Nor are they writing newspaper reports striving for historical accuracy. These Gospels

seek to tell us, we readers then and now, about the connection of the good news of Jesus both to the story of Israel and to the gentile world, about the clash of imperial and heavenly values, about a world for which many of us hope but not enough have the chance to find. To express such important, such sublime, messages, they write to spark our imaginations, to get us to see otherwise.

Not all people are able to believe these stories as accounts of what actually happened. I am among them. While the Christmas stories are set in historical time, the reigns of Herod the Great and Augustus Caesar are designed less to "record what happened" than to set the scene: to explain to readers removed from that time and place what the birth of Jesus signifies. For people who believe the Gospel writers are recording "what exactly happened," this study will enhance that belief. For people who are inclined to dismiss the stories as inconsistent, or unbelievable, this study will show how inspirational, challenging, and profound they are. We should even celebrate the distinct stories Matthew and Luke offer, since the import of what they recount must be told from multiple perspectives. Something so momentous cannot be contained in a single version. Indeed, if I as an outsider can see such value in these texts, surely those who are within the Christianity communion can find even more.

Studying the Bible should focus not only on learning the *what* in terms of what the texts say but also on determining the *so what* in terms of how the story conveys the good news that Matthew and Luke, and countless others, found in the conception and birth of Jesus of Nazareth. That *so what* is found when we, each one of us, encounter the text for ourselves.

What keeps us from going off the deep end in our interpretations (no, the star of Bethlehem is not about a UFO; no, Gabriel is not a Martian) is the rest of the Bible plus the two-thousand-year tradition of interpretation. Reading the Bible begins with the immediate

encounter between the individual and the text; here we ask, "What does this text mean to me, at this moment, in this place?" But our reading should not stop here. We should also ask, "What has this text meant to others in my life, in my church, in history, in the world?" All our readings are necessarily partial: we will never see everything the text has to convey.

The Nativity accounts had to fulfill two functions: they had to enlighten, and they also had to entice, to draw us more deeply into the chapters that follow. The Evangelists were writing primarily to insiders who want to know more, as Luke 1:1-4 indicates. When we recognize the historical background and the literary art, we can see how brilliantly the Evangelists, in quite different ways, accomplished their goals.

One problem for many of us today is that we do not know what was familiar to the people who lived two thousand years ago, whether Jews who witnessed the last years of the reign of Herod the Great, or Jews and gentiles both, followers of Jesus, who first heard the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. As with any biblical text, if we get the history wrong, not only will we miss the allusions to other texts as well as events, but also we risk misunderstanding the Gospel messages. Bad history leads to bad theology.

Bad history also leads to bad science and to bad literary interpretation. For example, unless we answer such questions as "Who was Herod the Great?" "Who were the Magi?" and "How did people in the first-century Mediterranean world understand stars?" we can never understand Matthew 2. Unless we recognize how Matthew seeks to show Jesus as a new Moses, we will miss the import of the slaughter of Bethlehem's children. And unless we know the original context of Rachel's weeping for her children, we will not hear the voice of comfort beneath the lament.

Such historical study is not designed to call into question Christian doctrine. God forbid, or as Paul would say in Greek, *me genoito*, "no way." Biblical studies should not seek to undermine belief; it should function to enhance it.

This concern for enhancing belief may sound strange coming from me. I am not a Christian, although I have spent over half a century (yes, I'm *that* old) studying the New Testament and its interpretations over time and across the globe. In my teaching, whether in Nashville at Vanderbilt Divinity School or in the spring of 2019 in Rome, where I was the first Jew to teach a New Testament course at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, I seek to enrich the Gospel proclamation by helping my students see the history behind the text, the literary and aesthetic implications in the text, and the multiple ways the text can be interpreted to address the needs of the people who hold it sacred.

At the same time, I regard these Gospel stories as Jewish stories and so part of my own history. Matthew and Luke quote Jewish sources, draw on Jewish images, are set in the Jewish homeland, and describe a Jewish messiah. If we miss that context, we'll also miss much of the message. Worse, if we get the Jewish context wrong, we might find ourselves inventing or perpetuating anti-Jewish stereotypes. Gospel proclamation should never be an occasion for bigotry. It is also my hope that more Jews would read these Advent stories and so recognize that Christmas is more than tinsel, or that donkey. In fact, I find the more I study this material, the better Jew I become, because I become more informed about the Jewish history that is the Christmas story (okay, the ivy and mistletoe, reindeer and yule log, and tinsel and tree are not Jewish; then again, neither are they in the Gospels).

Along with Matthew's and Luke's numerous allusions to and explicit statements concerning Jews and Judaism is the connection

between Jewish and Christian tradition in popular culture. Just as Lent reminds me of the Jewish "Days of Awe," the time between the New Year (Rosh HaShanah) and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)—the time of introspection when we Jews reflect on what we have done, what we should have done, and what we resolve to do; the time when we apologize to anyone we have hurt, by wrong action or by failing to act—so Christmas reminds me of Hanukkah, another winter festival (at least in the Northern Hemisphere). *Hanukkah* is the Hebrew word for "dedication," and it is mentioned in the Gospel of John, where Jesus visits the Temple: "The time came for the Festival of Dedication in Jerusalem. It was winter" (John 10:22).

When I was little, I believed not in Santa Claus (if my memory is correct, the Santa at the big department store in New Bedford was a fellow who attended our synagogue and spoke with a slight Yiddish accent) but in the Hanukkah Fairy who gave gifts to children, one each night for the eight-day holiday. I thought the Hanukkah Fairy was the sister of the Blue Fairy in Pinocchio, the fairy godmother who sang "Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo" in *Cinderella*, the Tooth Fairy, and Tinkerbell from *Peter Pan*. Then I learned that Hanukkah is about a fight for freedom of religion. The fascination continued as I told the story to my own children.

The same changes hold for the Christmas story: from a child's delight, to growing awareness of the literature and the context, to appreciation of the art and the music through a child's eyes and ears, and then back to the text. Its lessons are never ending, beautiful, and inspirational.

The chapters that follow take us through the four weeks of Advent. The first, "The Meaning of Memory," turns to Luke 1:5-25 and then 57-79, the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

The story transports us back to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and several other couples in Israel's Scriptures who suffered

from infertility. We'll see the humor—yes, laugh-out-loud humor—in Zechariah's encounter with the angel, and we'll see how family traditions can be modified, here with a woman's insistence. This opening story, which will make us smile with joy, is the perfect entry to the Christmas season, where what is old becomes new again and where delight, at least for a moment, replaces despair.

Chapter 2, "The Promise of Potential," picks up with Gabriel's announcement to the virgin engaged to Joseph, "Rejoice, favored one," and Mary's appropriate confusion; it's not every day that angels appear. Mary hears the startling news of her forthcoming pregnancy, agrees to the angel's words, and then hurries to the Judean highlands to confirm the angel's notice of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

It is to Elizabeth that Mary sings the song traditionally called the Magnificat, the song that begins, "With all my heart I glorify the Lord!" (Luke 1:46). Mary sings not only of divine glory; she sings also of ancient promises of social revolution. She sings the songs of Miriam and Deborah and Hannah, but in a new key for a new time.

From Mary's visit with Elizabeth we see not only the importance of solidarity, across the generations, between women, but also the importance of the human body, which provides its own signs of new beginnings. We see how revolutionary ideas can be given voice not just in the university or the town hall, but in the quiet hill country homes; not just by soldiers with arms or politicians with pens, but by mothers with song.

Finally, we see in Mary a model for ecumenical and interfaith relations. Mary sings that "everyone will consider me highly favored" (Luke 1:48). She is honored especially in Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and even in Islam. Yet she is part of the Protestant Bible as well, and she is a Jewish woman. Perhaps Mary, understood differently and yet shared across faiths, will become a bridge among us.

In chapter 3, "The Journey to Joy," we accompany Joseph and Mary from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea, where Jesus will be born in a stable, because, as the familiar saying goes, "there was no room at the inn." Here we also see how the "manger" anticipates Jesus' Last Supper; it is much more than just a bed of straw.

In chapter 3 we also meet Simeon and Anna, two elderly Jews in the Jerusalem Temple. Simeon and Anna, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, represent fidelity to the ancient traditions. We can see them handing on to the next generation, to Mary and Joseph and to the child, the trust that they will guard the stories and practices of the Jewish people.

The presentation of Jesus in the Temple strikes another important chord: the importance of what we today would call "institutional religion." In these days when "I'm spiritual but not religious" is often heard, and when churches are closing because of dwindling membership and deferred maintenance, the presentation shows us the importance of the organized religious community. Simeon and Anna are not participating in a "make it up as you go along" system. They are part of a community, a tradition, and a legacy.

Chapter 4 turns from Israel to "The Gifts of the Gentiles." We first spot gentiles in the New Testament's opening verse, Matthew 1:1: "A record of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, son of David, the son of Abraham." Abraham, recognized as the first Jew as well as the first to be "justified by faith" (so Romans 4), begins his life as a pagan. Then things change. Matthew's genealogy records the names of several gentiles who join Abraham's descendants: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and then perhaps Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah (we do know that Uriah himself was a gentile, a Hittite), and what stories they have to tell.

Even more, what might be called the "obstetrical irregularities" of their lives anticipate Jesus' virginal conception. According to Matthew, Joseph, "son of Jacob," is a true descendant of that first "Joseph son of Jacob," who according to Genesis, dreamed dreams and took his family to Egypt. Our Joseph dreams of an angel who tells him not

to divorce his pregnant fiancée, for Mary's pregnancy fulfills Isaiah's prediction of a virgin conceiving.

Finally, we'll visit with the Magi, who are neither kings nor necessarily just three nor, according to Matthew, wise. We'll learn why the star of Bethlehem is not an actual star, how to assess the role of Herod, whom Matthew calls "king of the Jews," and what texts accompany the tragic "Slaughter of the Innocents."

We end with the return of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus to Nazareth. Like that mustard seed, on the outskirts of the empire, in a small Galilean village, something small is about to become something marvelous, beyond expectations.



Chapter 1

THE MEANING OF MEMORY



Chapter 1

THE MEANING OF MEMORY

During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old. One day Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. Following the customs of priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense. All the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering. An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord's eyes. He must not drink wine

and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old."

The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they wondered why he was in the sanctuary for such a long time. When he came out, he was unable to speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he gestured to them and couldn't speak. When he completed the days of his priestly service, he returned home. Afterward, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant. She kept to herself for five months, saying, "This is the Lord's doing. He has shown his favor to me by removing my disgrace among other people."...

When the time came for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her because they had heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy. On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. They wanted to name him Zechariah because that was his father's name. But his mother replied, "No, his name will be John."

They said to her, "None of your relatives have that name." Then they began gesturing to his father to see what he wanted to call him.

After asking for a tablet, he surprised everyone by writing, "His name is John." At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he began praising God.

All their neighbors were filled with awe, and everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened. All who heard about this considered it carefully. They said, "What then will this child be?" Indeed, the Lord's power was with him.

John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,

"Bless the Lord God of Israel
because he has come to help and has delivered his people.
He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David's house,
just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago.
He has brought salvation from our enemies
and from the power of all those who hate us.
He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and remembered his holy covenant,
the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham.
He has granted that we would be rescued
from the power of our enemies
so that we could serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness in God's eyes,
for as long as we live.

You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.
You will tell his people how to be saved
through the forgiveness of their sins.
Because of our God's deep compassion,
the dawn from heaven will break upon us,
to give light to those who are sitting in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide us on the path of peace."

Luke 1:5-25, 57-79

Where and when we were born, the place and the time, are part of our identity; the details are recorded in our passports, and they will be mentioned in our obituaries. Yet we are an increasingly mobile society, one focused on the present and the future. Many of my students cannot name the president in office the year they were born, they have no clue about the Vietnam War, and mentions of the "summer of '67" evoke the response, "67 what?" And in the focus on youth, growth, and the future, many churches take for granted their congregation's older members. To ignore them is to ignore our history and heritage.

Knowing the where and when of Jesus is essential for understanding him. The Temple in Jerusalem, Bethlehem in Judea, Nazareth in Galilee, and Egypt where the family finds shelter—are more than just locations, and the reigns of Herod the King and Augustus Caesar more than dates. When the Evangelists mention a date and a place, they are telling us to pay attention, for time and space hold a surfeit of meaning. And when Luke chooses to begin this magnificent story not with Mary and Joseph but with Elizabeth and Zechariah, we pay attention as well, since this couple represents the older generation, our connection to the past, our communal memory.

This is no dry history lesson of names and dates, and Luke is nothing like the ivy-covered professor who can only state facts. Luke is a storyteller, and what a story this is. This elderly, and so-far infertile, couple will join Abraham and Sarah, and many others, in learning that they will have a child. Luke's recounting of the angel's conversation with the soon-to-be-dumbstruck Zechariah brilliantly weds the conventional to the comic. In recounting the story of John's birth and naming, Luke again combines miracle and memory. More than just Elizabeth, Zechariah, and their friends and relatives will rejoice at this birth, for the story should make all but the most somber of readers laugh with joy.

In the Days of King Herod

Following a four-verse prologue in which Luke, in elegant Greek, lists his purposes for writing, the narrative proper begins: "During the rule of King Herod of Judea" (Luke 1:5). This is not an auspicious start. Readers familiar with Matthew's Gospel know of a King Herod who ordered the massacre of the children in Bethlehem in the attempt to kill the baby Jesus, a rival king. While it is not clear whether this slaughter actually took place, it is not unthinkable given Herod's other outrages: he killed his own sons, whom he suspected of plotting against him; he killed his wife Mariamne, the Hasmonean princess, as well as her brother and her mother. According to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, Herod realized that the people he ruled hated him, whether for his taxes, for his replacing the High Priest in the Temple, for sponsoring pagan cities, or for killing his family members—the list goes on. Therefore, as he was dying, he ordered that "the whole nation should be put into mourning, and indeed made desolate of their dearest kindred, when he gave order that one out of every family should be slain" (*Antiquities* 17.181). The orders were not carried out, but the memory remained.

People in Luke's original audience also would have heard of Herod. He was the one who began the reconstruction of the Jerusalem Temple, he built the port of Caesarea Maritima, and he constructed numerous fortresses including one on Masada. His building projects still stand as testimony to his reign; to see the buildings without knowing the history behind them is insufficient. Any story set in the reign of King Herod is a story of political intrigue and of threats to life. This is the context, Luke tells us, of the conception and birth of John the Baptizer, who will die by the order of Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great.

Luke tells us more, for the opening verses anticipate another king, and another birth. Herod is a major political player, but he has his overlords. After siding with Marc Antony and Cleopatra, he shifted his loyalty to Caesar Augustus and so managed to keep in Rome's good graces. It will be this same Caesar who, according to Luke, ordered the census that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. Jesus' birth is set "in those days [when] Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in tax lists" (Luke 2:1). His birth has universal import.

Zechariah and Elizabeth

Herod is not the only person Luke introduces in chapter 1 verse 5. The verse in full reads, "During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron."

In antiquity family makes a difference. That's why both Matthew and Luke provide genealogies placing Jesus in the line of Abraham, Judah, and King David. At the same time, the biblical tradition insists that an illustrious background is not prerequisite for fulfilling divine will or for making our own mark on history. Luke signals this point by another contrast: we learn of Elizabeth's priestly connections, but as

we'll see, Mary's background, save for her connection to Elizabeth, goes unremarked. What is important in the Bible is not our pedigree or our ancestry, but our action.

Herod holds the throne, but Zechariah and Elizabeth are the focus of our attention. An immediate contrast appears: king versus priest, foreign interloper versus loyal children of Israel. To reinforce this focus on Zechariah and Elizabeth, and even signal a rejection of Herod's Roman connections, Luke changes style. The first four verses are ornate, formal, classical Roman rhetoric. But with verse 5, Luke shifts to the language of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of what will become the Old Testament.

The shift in the Greek is palpable, like going from modern English to Shakespearean language. With this shift, Luke takes us to the past, the world of early Jewish history. Luke thus insists: to understand Jesus requires understanding Jewish history and Jewish texts. More, Luke is telling gentile converts: this history of Israel is now part of your history as well. It is part of your story. Read, remember, and rejoice.

The name *Zechariah* comes from the Hebrew root *z-k-r*, which means "remember"; the "yah" at the end is the marker for YHWH, so the name means "God remembers." Memory is a trait of the biblical God. Already following the Flood, God promises Noah and so all humanity, "I will remember the covenant between me and you and every living being among all the creatures. Floodwaters will never again destroy all creatures" (Genesis 9:15).

The Jewish tradition even records Psalms and other prayers in which we remind God to remember us. For example, Psalm 119:49 reads, "Remember your promise to your servant, / for which you made me wait." When we feel the absence of the divine, when we think there is no reason to hope, we call out to God to remember, because we remember. We can do so because we know that the covenant

is permanent. It is this sense of a loving, permanent covenant that underlies the rawness and honesty of Jesus' cry from the cross in Matthew (27:46) and Mark (15:34), "My God, my God, why have you left me?" The cry is the first line of Psalm 22, and we remember that it ends with redemption: "Every part of the earth / will remember and come back to the LORD; / every family among all the nations will worship you" (Psalm 22:27).

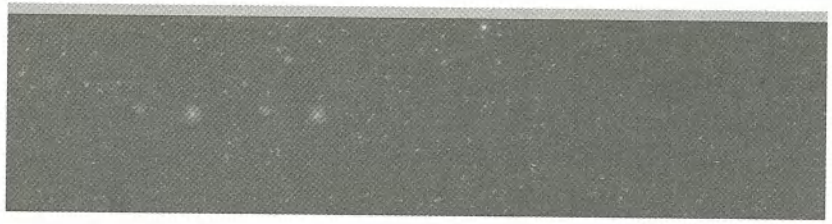
God also commands us to remember. Numbers 15:39 mandates, "This will be your fringe. You will see it and remember all the LORD's commands and do them. Then you won't go exploring the lusts of your own heart or your eyes." These are the fringes Jesus wears, and that the woman with the hemorrhage reaches out to touch (see Luke 8:44). Deuteronomy uses the refrain, "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt" (5:15 and elsewhere); that experience grounds Israel's ethics.

In Judaism, *yizkor* (from the same root) is the service, held four times a year, in which we Jews recall our family members, friends, and other members of our community, especially the martyrs, from the six million killed in the Shoah to more recent shootings in synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway. The service is not simply one of commemoration; we also pledge to honor that memory by giving to charity and doing works of righteousness. In that way, the name of the deceased can be a blessing.

Ephesians 2:12 takes up the refrain: "At that time you were without Christ. You were aliens rather than citizens of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of God's promise. In this world you had no hope and no God." We cannot know fully who we are, unless we know our origins. With new experiences, we will then reassess those origins. That is the message Luke gives: in light of these new stories, we find new meaning in the past.



When we feel the absence of the divine, when we think there is no reason to hope, we call out to God to remember, because we remember. We can do so because we know that the covenant is permanent.



Elizabeth's name likely derives from the Hebrew *Eli*, meaning "my God," the beginning of Jesus' cry from the cross ("My God, my God"). The second part comes from *sheva*, which is an oath. Thus, her name indicates that God keeps promises. That means that God remembers. An earlier Elisheba is the wife of Aaron, the first Israelite priest (Exodus 6:23).

Zechariah and Elizabeth are from priestly families, descended from Aaron. Priesthood in Judaism is not a vocation but a matter of paternal descent. If your father is a priest, you are a priest. If your father is a Levite, a type of subordinate priest descended from Aaron's ancestor Levi, the third son of Jacob and Leah, then you are a Levite. To this day, Jews know who the priests and Levites are. One clue, although it is not always reliable, is one's name. The names *Cohen*, *Kane*, and *Kaplan* often indicate priestly descent, since the Hebrew word for "priest" is *cohen*. *Levine*, *Levy*, *Levison*, and so on may indicate levitical (from *Levi*) descent. Although the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, certain practices in Judaism related to priests and Levites remain. For example, in many synagogues, priests and Levites have the honor of being called, respectively, first and second to say the blessing before and after the Torah reading on Shabbat (Sabbath/Saturday) morning.

With Elizabeth, Luke introduces another theme: the importance of women in the Gospel. The CEB translation, "descendant of Aaron," misses the nuance of the Greek, which literally says she is from the "daughters of Aaron." *Daughter* echoes through Luke's Gospel: Anna the "daughter of Phanuel," the prophet who greets the baby Jesus in the Temple, the ruler's "daughter" whom Jesus raises from the dead, the "daughter" whose hemorrhages Jesus dries up, the "daughter of Abraham" who receives her healing in the synagogue, and the "daughters of Jerusalem" who weep for Jesus. Along with the

births of sons, John and Jesus, there are also daughters, who are to be remembered and celebrated.

With Zechariah and Elizabeth, there is much to celebrate, since "they were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations" (Luke 1:6). The Greek for "righteous" is *dikaios*, another word that appears throughout the Gospel. Among several examples: Gabriel predicts that John will turn "the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous" (Luke 1:17 NIV); Simeon, who with Anna sees Jesus in the Temple, was "righteous and devout" (Luke 2:25); the centurion at the cross, witnessing Jesus die, proclaims him *dikaios*. "Righteousness" for Luke does not mean having the correct theology. Righteousness means behaving in a way marked by justice.

A number of my Christian students, having heard that there are 613 laws, regard following the commandments (Hebrew: *mitzvot*; the terms *bar mitzvah* and *bat mitzvah* literally mean, respectively, "son or daughter of commandment") as a burden and then give thanks that they are not "under the Law." Traditionally, there are 613 laws in the Torah, and Judaism through the centuries has added more, as times and places change. But they are hardly burdensome. There are more laws in every U.S. state than there are in the Jewish legal corpus. Nor are they impossible to follow. Paul agrees when he gives his autobiographical credentials, "with respect to righteousness under the Law, I'm blameless" (Philippians 3:6b).

For Elizabeth and Zechariah, for Paul, and for their fellow Jews, following the *mitzvot* is a blessing. We might think of these commandments as a template for multiculturalism. Within the Roman imperial context of Jesus and Paul, the Torah allowed Jews proudly to proclaim their own distinct identity through honoring the Sabbath and various feasts and fasts, to going on pilgrimage to the

Jerusalem Temple, to paying attention to what they wear and what they eat. Such things we remember when we look at those fringes, when we recall our history, when we celebrate our identities and our past.

The Jerusalem Temple

Although righteous, Zechariah and Elizabeth were childless, and, since Elizabeth had gone through menopause (Luke phrases this more discreetly), there was little hope for a pregnancy (Luke 1:7). Luke makes clear that her infertility is not the result of sin; the rest of the Bible makes the same point. The matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel all struggled with infertility, as did Mrs. Manoah, the mother of the judge Samson, Hannah the mother of the prophet Samuel, and the "great woman of Shunem" who was Elisha's patron. According to the Bible, it is God who opens and closes wombs; prospective parents are not to be blamed for their childless state. Rather, by noting the problem of infertility, the Bible allows readers to address it.

When the Bible mentions righteous couples suffering from infertility, a conception is not far behind. We can also anticipate that one or both of the parents will encounter a messenger—often an angel, sometimes a priest or prophet—to predict that conception. Remember, Luke advises, you have seen this story before. You are about to hear it again, but with a new couple, at a new time, with a new message.

The setting for this anticipated annunciation is in the Temple. Zechariah is not a high priest like Caiaphas, based in Jerusalem; he is an ordinary village priest, like the priest in Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan. There were far too many priests in Israel for all to serve in the Temple (unlike the clergy shortage that some churches face), so they had to work out a system for all the priests to serve.

Zechariah was chosen by lot to perform the incense offering (1:9). Casting lots, not uncommon in biblical texts, is a fair way of dividing property or duties. Proverbs 18:18 states, "Casting the lot puts an end to disputes / and decides between powerful contenders" (NRSV). Luke will repeat this motif in 23:34 (the soldiers cast lots for Jesus' clothing) and Acts 1:26 (to determine the replacement for Judas Iscariot). In such matters, whether casting lots in the Bible or a coin toss to see which team goes first, we can choose to see divine providence, or not.

In performing the incense offering, Zechariah will not be swinging a censer of the sort that for me evokes Tallulah Bankhead's comment to Cardinal Cody, "Darling, I love your dress but your purse is on fire." He places the incense on the incense altar (see Exodus 30). The Jewish tradition has always been one of sensory delights: sights and sounds, scents and tastes, attention to the body. Worship not only is spiritually uplifting and beneficial for community relations but also should be aesthetically pleasing: it gives us, when it can, the gift of beauty, something often needed in a world marked by bullets, poverty, and disease.

Let's savor the scene. The magnificent building, priests and the worshipers, Jews and pagans, from Europe and Asia and North Africa, sounds of Levites singing and children laughing, the smells of incense, and animals, even the tastes of the meat of the sacrifices. Worship at its best is something that engages not just the mind but the body.

It is the time of the afternoon incense offering, and "all the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering" (Luke 1:10). Prayer, a motif Luke repeats, begins here. Some perhaps were praying, as Zechariah and Elizabeth had, for children; others for health or healing; still others for the well-being of the people, or for thanksgiving, or, perhaps, for Herod to

take a long vacation. Or perhaps some were praying for the Messiah to bring about the kingdom of heaven.

The Angel's Good News

We know, since we've been told of the couple's childlessness, that an annunciation is near. We are not disappointed. The angel appears. In later biblical texts, angels appear with some frequency, sometimes in disguise, sometimes to interpret visions (as in the Book of Daniel), and sometimes to make announcements. The Epistle to the Hebrews (13:2) warns, "Don't neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it." The verse alludes to Genesis 18, the story of how Abraham and Sarah, our first righteous but infertile couple, heard that they would have a child.

Seeing the angel, Zechariah is, not surprisingly, terrified (Luke 1:12 NRSV). "Terrified" or "afraid" is *tarasso*, with the connotation of being shaken up. The same term appears in Matthew's Gospel (2:3) to describe King Herod's reaction to the report of a newborn King of the Jews. The only other time the verb appears in Luke's Gospel is in the story of the two on the road to Emmaus, when Jesus asks them: "Why are you startled? Why are doubts arising in your hearts?" (24:38). To use the colloquialism, he's about to rock their world.

This sense of being shaken up is Advent good news. Christmas should be more than putting up the tree and wrapping the presents. It should give birth to something that shakes up the routine, something that gets us to see the world otherwise. That shaking up is what it means to follow Jesus. To love one's enemies is scary; to take up one's cross is terrifying. Yet at the same time, Luke reminds us, there is a legacy that carries us forward and a promise that God will remember the covenant and bring about eternal justice.

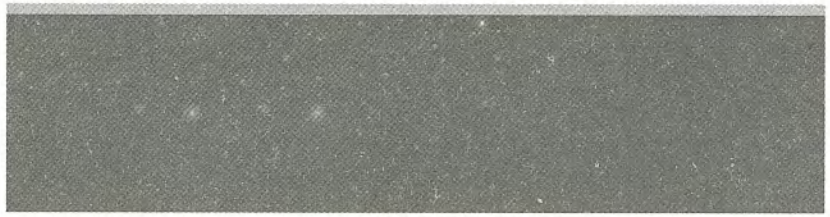
The angel immediately reassures the terrified priest: "Your prayers have been heard." The prayer, although unstated, was for a child: "Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son" (1:13a). Personal prayer is not selfish but honest; we should share our concerns with God. The famous Jewish teacher and slightly older contemporary of Jesus, Hillel, is quoted in the Mishnah, "If I am not for myself, who is for me? And when I am for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" (*Avot* 1.14). We must, if the need arises, pray for ourselves. Jesus tells a parable about a tax collector who prays, "God, show mercy to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). We pray for ourselves, but we cannot be concerned only for ourselves.

Luke will continue the motif of prayer: Jesus prays, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray as John taught his disciples, and so on. But Luke also humorously tweaks those who pray but do not act. Acts 12, which begins with a reference to "King Herod"—here Herod Agrippa I who reigned in the forties—describes how after killing James the brother of John, Herod imprisoned Peter. An angel breaks Peter out, and Peter makes his way to the home of Mary the mother of John Mark, where Jesus' followers have gathered. The congregation is upstairs praying, quite likely for Peter's release. Peter knocks at the gate. The Greek text reports that a slave (a "maid" in the NRSV [Acts 12:13]) named Rhoda reports to the assembled that Peter is at the gate. But they tell her, "'You've lost your mind!'. . . She stuck by her story with such determination that they began to say, 'It must be his guardian angel'" (Acts 12:15).

Peter continues to knock. When they finally open the gate, Peter instructs them to convey a message to James and then walks away. No use praying with this group. Luke gently criticizes people who pray, and pray, but who fail to open the gate, or to see the need at their doorstep.



Even without the angelic announcement, there are expectations placed especially on only children, or children born to comparatively older parents. It is their role to carry the family name; it is their responsibility to care for their parents.



The angel continues this good news by announcing to Zechariah, "You must name him John" (Luke 1:13b). John was a common name at the time, including John the brother of James and John the author of the Book of Revelation. The Hebrew *Yochanan* means "God [Yo, as in YHWH] is gracious."

That "many people will rejoice at his birth" (1:14) indicates more than sharing Zechariah and Elizabeth's happiness that their prayers have been answered. The people, as we shall see, expect something special from this child. Even without the angelic announcement, there are expectations placed especially on only children, or children born to comparatively older parents. It is their role to carry the family name; it is their responsibility to care for their parents.

Or, perhaps I am projecting. My mother, who struggled with infertility and a number of miscarriages, was forty-four when I was born, and I am an only child. Then again, no angel appeared to her, as far as I am aware.

John will be one of many who, in Luke-Acts, are filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit drives the plot of Luke-Acts. It appears next in Gabriel's annunciation to Mary, and then Elizabeth's recognition that the "mother of [her] Lord" has come to her (Luke 1:43). The Spirit is literally pregnant with meaning, bringing new life. That metaphor works better in Hebrew, where the Spirit is *ruach*, a feminine noun.

The Hebrew comes into Greek as *pneuma*, a term that like the Hebrew can also mean "wind" or "breath" (as in "pneumonia" or "pneumatic"). It inspires; it animates; it can literally knock us over. The Greek noun *pneuma* is, unlike the Hebrew, neuter (as opposed to masculine or feminine). This shift in genders is appropriate for the Spirit, which as the Gospel of John (3:8) puts it, "blows wherever it wishes."

In John's case, the Spirit marks him as a new Elijah: Gabriel announces, "He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God.

He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:16-17). The point is not that everyone had gotten off track, as Zechariah and Elizabeth and the people outside the Temple demonstrate. The point is preparation for the messianic age. Christian readers will take turning to "the Lord their God" as a reference to Jesus, called "Lord" (Greek: *kyrios*).

Two of many notices in the angel's words stand out: the first is the reference to Elijah and the second is the term *turn*. Here again, knowledge of the Jewish context enriches our understanding.

The prophet Malachi had predicted that Elijah would return from the heavens (he was transported up with a fiery chariot, hence, "swing low, sweet chariot"); Elijah, the forerunner of the "great and terrifying day of the LORD," will "*turn* the hearts of the parents to the children and the hearts of the children to their parents" (Malachi 4:5-6, italics added). The prediction concerns the messianic age, the end of time as we know it.

Luke rereads the prophecy to speak of the coming of the Messiah; the messianic age, with its resurrection of the dead, final judgment, and establishment of peace, health, and security, will have to wait until Jesus' return.

Such rereadings are to be expected in biblical interpretation. In light of present events, we understand the past differently. In light of Jesus, his followers come to understand the Scriptures of Israel differently. And in light of our own experiences, we will, if we look closely, always see new things in, and hear new messages from, ancient stories. We remember, but our memories are always being reshaped. We remember the past, but we are not to be prisoners of it. New understandings of past events inevitably arise.

Elijah, and John, will help in turning the people. Turning requires action. It is not simply an internal sense of contrition; it is taking action to restore correct relationships. That concern returns us to memory. To "turn" means to look back and see where we got off track. It means asking, "What should I have done that I did not do? What did I do that I should not have done? How do I get on the right road and then walk forward?"

For Malachi, turning mean parents saying to their children, "I'm sorry I did not spend more time with you when you were younger," or "I'm sorry I projected onto you my own concerns." It means being like the father of the prodigal son and his prudent older brother and making sure that both feel loved and valued. It means adult children saying to their parents, "I'm sorry I became impatient with you; I'm sorry I did not call or visit," and then making sure that occasions requiring apologies surface less often.

When people turn to the right path, when the disobedient turn to the wisdom of the righteous (so Luke 1:17), then they are "a people prepared for the Lord." But this preparation always comes with a cost. We can imagine the later conversations John would have with his parents, or Jesus with Mary and Joseph. What happens when the child decides to risk life for justice? What do we, the parents, say?

Zechariah's Doubt

Instead of asking about the Spirit, or John's revivalist role, Zechariah asks the practical question since, as he puts it, "My wife and I are very old" (1:18). The angel, huffily, replies, "I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence" (1:19). Who are you, he asks, to doubt me?

In antiquity, the Gospel was not read by most people, in part because copying books was expensive, and in part because most people were illiterate. Instead, the Gospel was performed. We can

picture the speaker, demonstrating angelic exasperation, wondering how he will deal with this obtuse priest.

Gabriel explains: he is bringing "good news" (1:19). The Greek is from the term *euangelion*, with *eu* meaning "good," as in "euphemism" and "eulogy"; *angelion* is from the same root as *angel*, "messenger." This term, which underlies "evangelist" and "evangelical," comes into Middle English as "gospel," good news or good story. The term was a common one in antiquity; the *euangelion* of the empire could be a tax relief or a parade. From the city of Priene in Western Turkey we have from 9 BCE (I have to tell my students that the inscription does not actually read "9 BCE") an inscription that celebrates the birth of Augustus Caesar as "good news" (*euangelion*), calls Augustus a "savior both for us and for our descendants," and as if in anticipation of the Christmas story, speaks of how "the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of good news for the world."

Therefore, when we hear the "gospel" or meet an "evangelical," we need to ask: what is the good news that you bring? The good news here in Luke's first chapter is not just about the conception, birth, and public role of John, or even the birth of Jesus; the good news includes these stories and more, through to reports of Jesus' resurrection, in written form. It is the story Jesus' followers will remember and repeat.

The angel then explains that because the priest doubted this good news, "you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen" (1:20). I imagine that at this point, words failed Zechariah. He was terrified and traumatized. Everything for which he had prayed will come to pass, but he is stuck between belief and doubt. What at this point can he say?

Often attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi is the advice, "Preach the gospel at all times. And if necessary, use words." How do we explain a revelation? How do we express the inexpressible? How does

the experience of the holy change our actions? our life? To proclaim the gospel requires words, but words without action are not signs of the Spirit; they are just wind. At the end of his story, Zechariah will find the words, but they will be, appropriately, prophetic poetry.

Meanwhile, the people are waiting; whenever clergy run late, people notice and, usually, complain. When Zechariah finally does appear, he cannot speak. The people "realized he had seen a vision in the temple" (1:22a). How they came to this realization Luke does not state, although the notice "he gestured to them" (1:22b) suggests that he used hand motions to describe this vision. What a strange game of charades, to express concepts such as "angel" and "pregnancy" and "turning." People in the late first century, watching the Gospel of Luke performed, would be laughing. Try explaining, through hand motions, the angelic vision yourselves, and then try not to smile.

Elizabeth's Pregnancy

Zechariah returns home. One could speculate, but I shall not, on how he explained his vision to Elizabeth. Thankfully, as we soon see, Elizabeth could read, so perhaps he wrote down the details.

Luke, again discreetly, mentions Elizabeth's pregnancy. For five months, that is, into her second trimester and showing, Elizabeth "kept to herself" (1:24). Luke gives no explanation for this behavior, but we can speculate: Was she afraid of miscarriage? Was she afraid that, before she had that baby bump, people would not believe she was pregnant?

That five-month marker also gives us alternative timing, and so we are back to the question of time and space. We have moved from "the days of King Herod" to "the time of the incense offering" to "five months" of pregnancy. From the political to the sacerdotal to the maternal: How do we mark time? Year of graduation? of marriage?

when children were born? before and after the death of a beloved? Do we keep looking at our watches? Is the time going too slowly or too quickly? Do we take the time to do what needs to be done?

Elizabeth recognizes that conception is a gift from God, who "has shown his favor to me by removing my disgrace among other people" (1:25). The people did not look at her as sinful, but they may have pitied her.

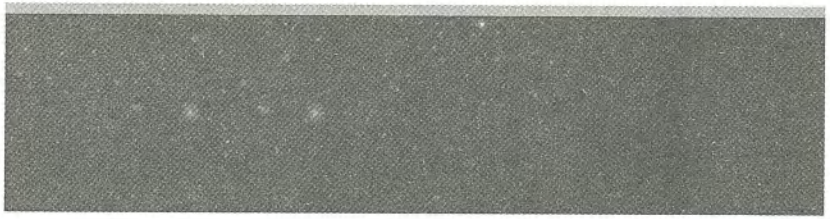
The reference to disgrace also connects Elizabeth to the matriarchs. Sarah exclaims, "Who could have told Abraham that Sarah would nurse sons? But now I've given birth to a son when he was old!" (Genesis 21:7). When Rachel, jealous of her fertile sister Leah, finally gives birth, she states, "God has taken away my shame" (Genesis 30:23). Before giving birth to Samuel, Hannah endured the taunts of her fertile co-wife, Peninnah (1 Samuel 1:6). When Elkanah asks his wife, "Hannah, why are you crying? . . . Why won't you eat? What are you so sad? Aren't I worth more to you than ten sons?" (1 Samuel 1:8), Hannah gives no reply.

For women and men struggling with infertility, who have experienced miscarriages, and who so very much want a child, Elizabeth's story acknowledges their pain.

When I was in graduate school, many of my friends were getting married and having children. I planned: I should finish the dissertation; I need financial security; I should have a house and daycare. And I worried about fertility; would I have the same problems that my mother had? Sarah Elizabeth arrived when I was twenty-nine (with Ph.D. and employed at Swarthmore College); Jay and I were among the older parents among her nursery school cohort. She was named after my father, Saul, and my teacher in graduate school, Elizabeth Clark. Yet she also carries the names of two very strong women, Sarah and Elizabeth, who did the impossible.



For women and men struggling with infertility, who have experienced miscarriages, and who so very much want a child, Elizabeth's story acknowledges their pain.



John's Birth

John's birth is a time for great rejoicing, not only by his parents, but also by their neighbors and relatives (Luke 1:57-58). These family members and friends remained with the new parents until the eighth day after the child's birth, when their son is circumcised and named. We do not have clear testimony from Jewish sources, until the eighth century, that naming took place on the eighth day. It is possible that Luke preserves an earlier Jewish tradition. Remarkably, on occasion, the New Testament provides the background to Jewish history, rather than the other way around.

The plan was to name the child Zechariah after his father (1:59). King Herod had a number of children also named Herod, including some whom Luke mentions: Herod Antipas (who beheaded John), Herod Agrippa I (who killed James), and Herod Agrippa II (who heard Paul's defense but did not set him free).

A new time, a new practice, begins when Elizabeth insists, "No, his name will be John" (1:60). She speaks because the father, Zechariah, is still mute. The friends and relatives, not willing to accept Elizabeth's assertion since John is not a family name, motion to Zechariah; the motioning suggests that Zechariah is not only mute but also deaf. They doubt the woman. We find the same motif at the end of Luke's Gospel (24:10-11), when the women report seeing the empty tomb and the message from two "men" in dazzling clothes. The men do not believe them. They should have learned.

The tradition in Eastern European Judaism, Ashkenazic Judaism, is to name a child after a deceased relative to keep the memory alive. My name, Amy, is for my father's mother, Amelia. Jill is after my mother's father, Jacob. My parents always called me Amy-Jill to make sure that my father's mother and my mother's father would be remembered. Our son, Alexander David, is named for Jay's Aunt Elsie,

who had no children of her own, and for my maternal grandmother, Deborah known as Dora.

Luke prompts us: Do we know the meaning of our names? Were we named after a relative or family friend? after a politician or a movie star, a scientist or an author? Whose memory does our name keep alive, and whose memories do we cherish and honor? In whose memory do we act?

Zechariah confirms his wife's announcement. He asks for a writing tablet and writes, "His name is John" (1:63). Luke tells us that all were amazed. What I find amazing is the impression that everyone present was literate (sometimes being a historian can detract from the appreciation of the narrative). Luke does tend to give major figures an educational upgrade.

Zechariah's Song

Only now does Zechariah speak; he sings his praise of God (1:64). The song is traditionally called the "Benedictus," Latin for "blessed," the opening word (1:68 NRSV). This speaking confirms the miracle of John's birth. No longer silent, Zechariah had found the words to express his joy.

He is not alone in rejoicing. "Everyone throughout the Judean highlands" begins to ponder the child's fate (1:65). For some parents, giving birth means the establishment of a college fund or plans for athletic expertise or piano lessons. Perhaps, Luke suggests by the newness of John's name, that we have to let children be themselves, not clones of us, and not, heaven forbid, the object through which we fulfill our own longings.

When Sarah was in high school, she had little interest in studying. She asked, "Why study for the A if I can get B-plusses without the work?" Her father and I, both academics, were flummoxed. We could not fathom someone not wanting the A. But Sarah said, "I'm not an

academic." Jay and I looked at each other and suddenly, happily, realized that Sarah was her own person. Children should be what they want to be. We can guide, but we cannot control. Sarah has her own, very successful career, and we could not be happier. We encouraged her to be herself and to pursue dreams that she dreamed. That's what John's parents did, for John did not follow his father into Temple service. He found another way of serving the community.

The Spirit appears again, this time to inspire Zechariah to prophesy. After nine months of silence, what a celebration he offers. He's not the first to sing in Luke's Gospel; his words follow Mary's Magnificat, which she sings to Elizabeth (Zechariah, silent, may have been taking notes). He will not be the last, for his song anticipates the brief hymn of Simeon in the Temple. The Nativity accounts are not just prose; they are poetry and song.

Luke tells us that Zechariah, filled with the Spirit (of course), "prophesied" (1:67) and in doing so provides the assurance that, despite the newness of the Christmas story, a rock-solid base secures an anchor. God is invested in history, from the international level to the personal one. This investment does not mean micromanaging, and it does not mean eliminating either free will or the role of nature, of wind and seas, droughts and blight. It means both concern for the world and all its inhabitants and support that this investment, the tradition of Torah and Gospel, will guide us toward the good.

Zechariah's prayer, like Mary's Magnificat, is less a prediction than an assurance: God has acted in the past, and those actions have repercussions for the present and the future. The verbs of the prayer are in the past tense: "Bless the Lord God of Israel," the priest exhorts, "because he has come to help and has delivered his people" (1:68). *He has delivered.* Zechariah the priest acknowledges what Jews then, and now, already know: we are a people delivered from slavery and exile. Slaves, then and now, understand freedom in a way that people never oppressed cannot; people in exile understand home in a way

that those who have never been displaced cannot. At the same time, Zechariah, like the Exodus story, prompts us to remember those who remain yet enslaved and displaced. That remembering, that learning from our own history, is part of God's investment in us. It is also part of our responsibility to each other.

Zechariah continues by recalling God's promises regarding "David's house" (1:69). The concern is a political one, for David is not only the sweet singer of psalms but also King David, the founder of Israel's monarchy. To evoke David is necessarily to contrast him with Herod. Luke refers to David as God's "servant" (Greek: *pais*, an alternative translation would be "child"). Whether we translate the term as "servant" or "child," we learn that David's rule is not classified by might but by meekness. This is the type of leadership Jesus will promote.

Zechariah's assurance that God has "brought salvation from our enemies / and from the power of all those who hate us" (1:71) may be difficult to accept, given our present times, when every day brings news of a new atrocity. I am writing this paragraph in the wake of a shooting in Poway, near San Diego, where a young man, taught in his church that Christians had replaced Jews in the history of salvation, and convinced by the Bible that Jews are damned Christ-killers who deserve death themselves, entered a synagogue and began to carry out what he thought was his divinely ordained mission. He was not the first person both to claim Jesus as Lord and to kill Jews as the way he demonstrated his faith; he will not be the last to misinterpret his text and his God.

Luke reminds us of the connections of the church and Israel; Zechariah calls the church to remember its origins. When Zechariah speaks of God's "holy covenant" (1:72) and of the "solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham" (1:73), he insists that the covenant with the people Israel continues.

The covenant with Abraham has a both/and rather than an either/or focus: it is both for Jews and for gentiles, for in Abraham, "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). And since we are part of the same covenantal system, we should have a sense of mutual responsibility.

Yet for that investment to remain secure, the assurance that "we would be rescued from the power of our enemies" (Luke 1:74) requires Christians to help: by recognizing the common heritage of church and synagogue, by acknowledging the ongoing covenant with the Jewish people, by avoiding anti-Jewish teaching and preaching. Only then, will we be better able to "serve him without fear" (1:74).

After the promise and the wish for the nation, Zechariah finally turns to his son. He refers to John as "child" (Greek: *paidion*), a synonym for *pais*. King David and John, soon to be known as the Baptizer, are connected, each with his own role and both part of the larger whole of salvation history. The two anticipate the child, waiting in Mary's womb, who will be born in the next chapter of that history, and this Gospel.

John will, like his father, continue the role of prophet (1:76), the teller of truths. The comment that he will "go before the Lord to prepare his way" is replete with meaning. Zechariah here anticipates Luke 3:4, where the evangelist introduces the adult John, "as it was written in the scroll of the words of Isaiah the prophet, / *A voice crying out in the wilderness: / 'Prepare the way for the Lord; / make his paths straight.'*" Isaiah's prophecy, in its original context, was a message of consolation to the exiles in Babylon; Isaiah 40 begins, "Comfort, comfort my people! says your God" (40:1), and moves to the celebratory: "A voice is crying out: / 'Clear the LORD's way in the desert! / Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God! . . . / The LORD's glory will appear, / and all humanity will see it together; / the LORD's mouth has commanded it" (40:3, 5). Build a highway in

the desert, Isaiah says, for your exile is coming to an end and you are about to return home.

By evoking Isaiah's prophecy, Luke is telling readers: I've given you the first verse of Isaiah 40, now fill in the rest of the Song. The Gospel writers consistently allude to Israel's Scriptures, and our reading is inevitably enriched if we recognize the allusions and then put the context of the original quote into conversation with its Gospel use. Zechariah, by alluding to Isaiah, reminds us of exile and return, of promise and fulfillment, of ancient Israel and the new movement to come.

And he does more. Luke's attentive readers would have noticed the "voice" that "is crying out" and the "LORD's mouth" and then recalled that Zechariah had been unable to speak. What are words worth? What are voices for? What will our mouths open to say?

For Luke, Isaiah's proclamation has new meaning: The "Lord" for Luke is Jesus of Nazareth, and the "way" to be prepared is not a literal highway in the desert, but the new movement that called itself not "Christian" but followers of "the Way" (see Acts 9:2). The sense of movement, of action, remains in the name. The people who will follow John, and from him to Jesus, will be known by walking the walk or, as John will express the point, "produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives" (Luke 3:8).

Zechariah's hymn highlights two more themes, along with the role of the Spirit, the attention to women's roles, and the connections to ancient Israel and the biblical tradition. First, Zechariah connects the work of John to the "forgiveness of their sins" (1:77). His attention is not on the cross, but on human interaction. Jews knew that God was always ready, and eager, to forgive anyone who repents. They also knew that repentance required correction: turning, as we have seen, means walking the right path. And John draws the map.

John tells those who come to him for immersion that the fruits they must bear consist in ethical action: "Whoever has two shirts

must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same" (3:11). So simple and so difficult.

Finally, Zechariah speaks of light to those who sit in darkness (1:79). His point is not a matter of theological proclamation; his point is that people really were in his time—and really are, in our time—sitting in darkness, "in the shadow of death." We have heard the words before, in the famous Psalm 23:4, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me" (KJV). The image of darkness also appears in Isaiah 42:7, where Israel's role is "to open blind eyes, to lead the prisoners from prison, and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon." Rather than immediately spiritualize the language of light and darkness, Luke, echoing Isaiah, insists on attending to those who are in prison, behind bars, without daylight.

The sense of God's "deep compassion" (Luke 1:78) makes bearable that shadow and can allow us to find that "path of peace" (1:79). That insistence is how many behind bars continue to live.

We will not meet Zechariah and Elizabeth again in Luke's Gospel. But we know that they raised a child in the Jewish tradition. Perhaps he learned from this mother's example to insist on what he knew to be right, despite community pressure to the contrary. Perhaps he learned from his father the importance of asking the right questions and using the right words, of speaking up when cries of justice were needed to break the silence of complicity.

Chapter 1 of Luke's Gospel ends with the notice concerning John: "The child grew up, becoming strong in character. He was in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel" (1:80). John will sit in the shadow of darkness. The psalmist sang, "You bathe my head in oil" (Psalm 23:5) while Herod Antipas will murder the Baptizer. Yet Zechariah's song suggests that John knew he had done what he was called to do. The cup did not pass for him, as it will not pass for Jesus. John lost his life, but his message will be remembered.



Chapter 2

THE PROMISE OF POTENTIAL