

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
Luke 1: 5-25

We are people of Christmas, not of Advent. Christmas is a time to get together with friends and family. Christmas is a time of parties and presents, of warmth, love, lights and decorations. It is a time to dress up and be socially appropriate. It is a time to celebrate the miraculous arrival of Christ as a baby, all cute and cuddly. On the other hand, Advent is the time for soothsayers, palm-readers, and wild prophets who push the boundaries of the socially appropriate. So, when Zechariah, the orderly priest, learns that he will finally have a child, it is ironic that this child would become a prophetic figure wearing camel hair and eating locusts.

In Advent, the Revised Common Lectionary, which proposes scripture passages for each Sunday, always has passages that tell us to watch for the signs and always include John the Baptist. John the Baptist is a routine figure in Advent because Advent is about anticipating, about getting ready. It is about looking for signs of what is coming and participating in what God is doing. So those who practice scrutiny of palms or cards or constellations are naturally suited to a season of watching for signs. It is no surprise that the Magi are among the first to recognize the Christ-child, as they are reading the stars while others plod on with their daily routines. Such a season and such a stance attract, as you can imagine, more eccentric types.

This is why I find preaching in Advent to be challenging. Because it makes me feel like a crazy prophet with wild eyes waving my arms like John the Baptist, preaching about signs and getting ready and seeking the kingdom. Meanwhile, everyone just wants a cozy cup of hot cocoa and to sip by the fireplace. And part of me wants to as well. Sit by the fire. Relax. Sing Christmas carols with friends. Accept the moment. But Advent invites us to remember that Christ entered the world decisively and that Christ is coming back to bring his work to fulness. And so, we ought to make ready and to be about watching for and participating in Christ's kingdom.

My oldest brother, Dan, is a prophet. Self-declared naturally, living in a run-down house in rural western NY. Unfortunately, he does not follow the liturgical calendar, because I think Advent would be well suited to his sensibilities. Now I am not that familiar with my brother's prophetic calling, as he struggled to verbalize it. You see, when you are a prophet, conveniently or inconveniently, you cannot relate to others and you cannot trust others to be able to advise you in your

calling. Because those people think in the way of this world, when you are inspired to think in ways not yet fully known or realized. Prophets tend to sound crazy. And we tend to ignore them, because they feel crazy, and sometimes, well, they are crazy. And as Jesus said, a prophet will not be honored in his own home town, so my brother Dan cut himself off from the family years ago.

Dan cut himself off for reasons that had as much to do with family dynamics as prophetic callings, I suspect. And while I obviously am not convinced of my brother's prophetic office, he exhibits a trait worth paying attention to—that he will not accept what others want him to accept. He will make a new way. And he will keep speaking his wild truths even if others don't believe it.

About fifteen years ago the tv show South Park featured a character meant to caricature Al Gore, and this character went around warning everybody of this terrible beast called manbearpig. I never watched the show. I've just read about it. They were obviously scoffing at the former vice-president who has been trying to set off the alarm on climate change for about 25 years, if not longer. So, they parody him as an alarmist. This was when Gore's documentary came out telling of rising seas and severe storms and who could really take him seriously and rearrange the priorities of society and economy? Are we really to believe that half of Manhattan would be underwater? He sounded crazy. Beware of the Manbearpig! Run! Act! But people did not. They scoffed.

Then a few years ago, I read again that South Park reintroduced the theme, with an actual “manbearpig” beast, and everyone screaming “manbearpig” is real! It seemed a type of admission by the writers that, Al Gore, you sounded crazy and we did not know what to do with it, but maybe you weren't as crazy as we thought. Now, I don't think climate change sounds as crazy now as it did twenty-five years ago, but I mention this, because prophets always sound a little crazy, and it is hard to tell real prophets from crazy ones. Because they interrupt the moment, they interrupt the assumed, they interrupt the comfortable and the routine, telling of things we need to attend to, calling for change, usually at a time when people are not ready or able to hear it. Prophets are inconvenient. Prophets don't often get invited to Christmas parties. After all, who wants to get trapped in the corner listening to someone drone on about grave matters when everyone else is mingling about chit-chatting of holiday plans.

Now Zechariah is a priest. And in the priestly tradition, not unlike our Presbyterian tradition that sees God working in ways that are “decently and in good order,” there is a certain orderliness to how God works. There is a ritual aspect where we have mapped out ways of responding to different situations. Luke tells us that

Zechariah and Elizabeth “lived blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.” It is not that they were perfect, but that they followed all the festivals, rituals, and regulations. They did everything decently and in good order. On the other hand, it is in the prophetic tradition where God tends to show up through an angel and tells you that everyone is off track, and so God is throwing a change-up. God is going outside of that good order to do his work, to get our attention, to bring us back to the covenant. Zechariah doesn’t know how to respond to the angel. But even so, Zechariah asks a question not unlike those asked by Moses himself, the prototypical prophet, “by what sign will I know?” And the angel responds, how about when you can speak again? Is that clear enough for you?

In rendering Zechariah mute, the Spirit is disrupting Zechariah’s life and his calling as a priest. But ironically, at the same time is reordering his life. You see Zechariah and Elizabeth are childless, and child-bearing was a part of identity and dignity, and to be unable to bear a child casts a stigma and a shadow over everything in their life, especially a man of Zechariah’s office. The closest parallel I can think of in our modern existence is the associations with AIDS, especially 30-40 years ago. If someone had AIDS it was hard not to have an association between the condition and connotations of ill-advised lifestyles or with sinful conduct or some such thing. Zechariah is a priest, but he is childless, and therefore living under a continual shroud, a shroud now lifted with the news of the angel. His own change of fate becomes a herald of God’s movement. Elizabeth articulates the significance in the last verse of our passage: “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

God is moving, though Zechariah will only be able to make gestures about it for some time. He will have to hold it. And even after John’s birth, he will have to grow before his message becomes known. It will take time, but God is moving. And the aging Zechariah and Elizabeth are figures that embody that movement, that are signs of it.

And like Zechariah, we don’t always know what to anticipate. What are we looking for? What are the signs we are supposed to be watching for? Maybe it starts with holding the news that God has entered the world and is at work. But that prophetic sensibility says that we ought to be attentive and responsive to that work.

The poem this morning by David LaMotte speaks to more subtle signs of newness, subtle but remarkable, happening around us in the natural world, if we only have eyes to see it. The natural world is perhaps, for LaMotte, the prophet calling us to

pay attention, learn, take hope, and participate in the ongoing work of creating new and beautiful things. I suppose LaMotte's prophetic voice is a little more palatable for us modern thinkers. Like a Mary Oliver or a Wendell Berry, he calls us to pay attention to nature, to the quiet but miraculous happenings all around us, and to be accountable to them.

But what the prophets have in common with a poet like LaMotte; they call us to pay attention to what we might otherwise miss. And they insist that paying attention makes a difference. This paying attention might re-orient our minds, hearts, priorities, actions and ways of being in the world. And if we were to be responsive to these observations, we would actually help shape a different possibility, a different future, a different world, a different self.

In his ministry, Jesus is continually calling attention to what he calls the kingdom of God. It is a different way of thinking and being. It is a different economy. It is a place where the poor are blessed, and the meek, lowly, and downcast are lifted up. It is a place where orphans and widows are once again connected and cared for. It is a place where forgiveness is offered freely, and all find fruitful work and reward. It is a vision birthed when the babe was born in a manger, when God visited earth in incarnate form and grew, modeled, and taught a different way. But it is not done. This kingdom has yet to come to fulness, and we are called to watch and to participate.

And if we can anticipate at all what it looks like for this kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, then such anticipation and awareness might re-orient our minds, our hearts, our souls, our priorities, our actions and our ways of being in the world.

We light the candle of hope this morning. Can you be a prophet of hope? Hope that this kingdom that Jesus speaks of is possible. Hope that the broken can be healed, the devastated restored, the downcast lifted up, the lonely can forge new relationships, the over-confident can come to perceive anew, and the discouraged can become a voice of possibility. Can you be a prophet of such hope that Christ can redeem the world? That Christ can redeem you?

Now, remember that expectation is a foggy business. Details tend to be fuzzy. After all, the magi missed the mark by a few miles, ending up in Jerusalem asking for directions. John the Baptist will anticipate a different kind of messiah and will be confused by Jesus. Expectation is a foggy business, and you will be forced to walk by faith and work off of approximations. And you might be scoffed at or written off, as prophets often are. Because the world shapes our perceptions and our expectations and a range of possibility in such a way that we struggle to

imagine beyond it. Therefore, the kingdom of God, as Christ articulates it, may sound crazy.

But, could we imagine a different way? Can you imagine with the prophet Isaiah a time when the rugged roads to the temple would become flat and straight and smooth so that all could come into God's presence? Can you imagine with Mary a time when the proud and powerful would be brought low, and the lowly lifted up? Can you imagine with Simeon in the temple a time when God's favor would be shown and what you lived your whole life hoping for would be fulfilled in some way?

What is the hope you want to speak to this Advent? What are you looking for signs of? What are you waiting for? If you were to dial up your "wild prophet" for a moment, what would it be for? And, if you don't mind my asking, is it good news for all people, as the prophets and Jesus promise? Does it awaken us to a fuller sense of what it means to Love the Lord and love one another? Does it remind the down-trodden of how valued and loved they are? Does it call the powerful and wealthy to accountability and responsibility towards God and others?

What is the good news you have to speak of, the hope, the possibility? The details are fuzzy. Don't worry about that. And people will scoff, but don't worry about that either. But anticipate and call attention to that hope! Hold that hope in your very self, the way Zechariah and Elizabeth will. Because our orderliness and routine-ness have been disrupted by the prophetic, calling us to wake up, prepare, and take heed. We have been called to embody hope. And quite frankly, if I must stand up here all Advent and sound crazy while the world drinks their hot cocoa, I'd rather not be alone.

And all God's people said...Amen.

### *The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold*

<sup>5</sup> In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. <sup>7</sup> But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

<sup>8</sup> Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. <sup>10</sup> Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. <sup>11</sup> Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup> You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>16</sup> He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” <sup>18</sup> Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” <sup>19</sup> The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. <sup>20</sup> But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. <sup>22</sup> When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. <sup>23</sup> When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

<sup>24</sup> After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, <sup>25</sup> “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Jeremiah 33:14-16

*The Righteous Branch and the Covenant with David*

<sup>14</sup>The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>15</sup>In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>16</sup>In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

<sup>17</sup>For thus says the LORD: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, <sup>18</sup>and the levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to make grain offerings, and to make sacrifices for all time.