

"Sin and Forgiven Both Have an I"

Text: Luke 1:5-23

How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is given
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.

No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in. (TLH 647 v.3)

Dear Fellow Servants, you who have Christ, and therefore lack nothing:

Advent is a time of action and motion; a time of chaos and preparation. Evidently it is no longer even optional. It's mandatory. There apparently is no "opt out clause" from all that we force into our schedules. In fact I hesitate even to bring this up, for fear you might be thereby reminded of (and distracted by) that never-ending list of all those things that you still "have to do" before Christmas.

Nothing really wrong with staying busy, in and of itself. Busy helps to keep us out of trouble and makes the days go faster. You make Christmas preparations now so that you can enjoy later. The problem, of course, is when we lack balance; in this case, when we don't balance the busy time with necessary downtime or quiet time. Both the human body and the human soul require both.

To this end we rely, in part, on our church time to afford us some of the "soul time" that is so critical to our spiritual wellbeing. Our text for this morning reminds us of the need (not the luxury, the *need*) to stop, look, and listen – as the railroad crossing signs remind us.

Our meditation this morning centers around the account of a man who was actually forced by an angel to close his mouth and to open instead both his ears and his heart to the word and promise of his God. That man is Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, and his account is found in the Gospel of Luke, the First Chapter:

Luke 1:5-23 *There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. ⁸ ¶ So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people was*

praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ "And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵ "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ "He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'" ¹⁸ And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. ²⁰ "But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time." ²¹ And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. ²² But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless. ²³ And so it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house.

This is God's Word, given to mankind through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Each time we are reminded of the origin of these words, their true value is (and ought to be) magnified in our hearts and minds. To prepare ourselves for the study of these words, so we pray, **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

What a fascinating study is presented to us in the person and character of Zacharias. More than just a "good guy" in the eyes of the world, Zacharias was righteous in the only way that really matters. Our text tells us that he was **"righteous before God."** That expression ("**Righteous before God**") in no way indicates that Zacharias was without sin, or that he had thereby earned his way into the good graces of his God by his keeping of the law. "**Righteous before God**" is a forensic or judicial term. God is the Judge who *declares* righteous, for no man is without sin. God declared Zacharias to be not guilty because of his faith in the Promise of a Savior – a faith all the more remarkable

in that it still resided in the hearts of the faithful remnant of Israel after so many centuries. Zacharias clung in faith to the promise, and God credited that faith as righteousness.

But don't we read that Zacharias and his wife were both ***"walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless"***? In man's eyes, certainly, for the man's neighbors undoubtedly knew him as a good guy. As far as man could see, Zacharias was blameless. You might say the same about several of your friends and neighbors. God, however, saw the man's heart. There he found plenty of sin also in Zacharias, but nonetheless *regarded* or *pronounced* him to be righteous because of his faith in the Promise of a Savior. Our text for this morning certainly bears that out, for a sinless man does not doubt the word of an angel of God. Nor does a perfect, sinless man tremble with fear in the presence of holiness.

So we find this Godly man, Zacharias, faithfully serving in the temple – where he is visited by God's holy messenger. Don't miss either the import or the irony here. The importance of this event is that that visit to Zacharias was it – it was the first public announcement from God himself that the time of fulfillment was finally at hand. That great event, eagerly anticipated since the Fall in the Garden of Eden, had at long last arrived. The earth shattering, civilization altering, mind-bending event was announced at this moment. This is the event where God first announced the fulfillment of his great, saving promise. The time to send the Messiah had arrived.

That's the *importance* of this event. The *irony* of this great moment is, first of all, that the announcement of the fulfillment of the promise of the long-awaited New Covenant was given there among the symbols of the Old. An Old Testament priest with his incense burner working in the place of daily sacrifices was there told that the time of the Great Sacrifice and of the New Covenant had arrived, and that its arrival would actually make obsolete everything that Zacharias had been doing as an Old Testament priest his entire life.

Yet that was not the only irony here. Note also what exactly the reaction was of this righteous, God-fearing, Promise-believing priest when he received the news that would forever alter the course of world events and usher in a new relationship between God and mankind. His reactions was skepticism and doubt. Why? Why would a righteous man, who based his hope for eternity on God's promise, not immediately embrace the news, leap for joy, and then run out and share that news?

Probably because he himself was involved. It is easy for us to believe in promises when they are abstract and impersonal, but much more difficult when they are concrete and individual. We tend to believe that "too good to be true" things can and do happen to others. It is much harder when *we* are the recipients – when there is an "I" involved.

Try that on for size in your own personal life and see how it fits. Don't you find it easy to agree that ***"God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not charging their sins to them"*** when you think in terms of "the world," or to *other* devout Christians? It is much more difficult to say, *"God was in Christ, reconciling me to himself, not charging my sins to my own spiritual account."* How much easier to say *"God forgives sins for Jesus' sake"* than it is to say *"God has forgiven my sin of _____ for Jesus' sake."* (Fill in the blank – theft, adultery, lust, bad language, hatred, coveting) Easier to believe that *"God loves sinners"* than to imagine that *"God loves me."* Yet if the first is true, the second must also be true. If God loves sinners, then he loves also *me*. If God forgives sinners, then God forgives me. We need to see the "I" in forgiven as clearly as we see the "I" in sin.

Zacharias believed that God would send a Savior, but that confidence just seemed to fall apart when *he* became involved. His confidence was shaken when he ran, head-first, into the wall of his own reason. The "reason" problem was that he and his wife were too old to have a child. Sounds kind of silly to us, in this context, doesn't it? The fact is that Zacharias wouldn't even be alive to hear the angel's message if God couldn't arrange for old people to have babies. Zacharias undoubtedly knew the story of his ancestor Abraham, who was also given a son long after the normal time for such things had passed. Doubting the word of an angel is silly enough in itself; how much more to doubt the word of an angel foretelling what he knew had happened before. To put it another way, Zacharias believed that the Promise would one day be fulfilled, believed that he was talking to an angel, believed that a similar old-age birth had once taken place, but came to doubt the angel's message the instant *he himself* became involved. Zacharias turned his eyes inward at the wrong time. The inevitable result for Zacharias was to reason that since he couldn't do this, neither could God.

The mighty Gabriel addressed the problem by giving Zacharias something of a "time out." Because of his words of doubt, Zacharias was not allowed to utter another word (doubting or otherwise) until the day that God's holy promise, delivered here by his angel, was fulfilled. The forced silence undoubtedly served to remove Zacharias from

many of the distractions of the next 40 weeks and afforded him time to contemplate both the angel's promise and his own reaction to that promise. In Zacharias' case, the angel-imposed silence was golden. You will no doubt recall how this story eventually ended. ***Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." ⁶¹ And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." ⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.*** [Luke 1:57-64](#)

Note that Zacharias did not say, "His name *shall be* John" – as though he himself was doing the naming. He said, "***His name is John***" – thereby acknowledging the word and promise of his God. The necessary lessons had been learned. It is God who determines what will be and what will not be. Man's doubt or skepticism never alters God's truth. God had predetermined the role Zacharias' son would play, as he had also determined the boy's name. Note that it took some quiet time for Zacharias to be reminded; some downtime before he came to terms with such things.

Make similar time for yourself, especially during this busy season. Stop talking and doing long enough to listen – to listen to that blessed promise and to apply it to yourself and to your own eternal future. Remove this season from the superficial, and install it firmly into the concrete. You and I do that whenever the promise of the gospel ceases to be some vague promise to the world, and instead floods my world with the peace of sins forgiven – when we truly see the "I" in forgiven. The message of Christmas becomes real and personal whenever you and I, through faith, recognize that Jesus did not just leave the perfection of heaven to save others; he left heaven and was made man to save me. That is certainly part of what it means to ***"be still and know that I am God."*** God certainly *can* do incredible things. More to the point this morning is the fact that God *has* done incredible things, not just to or for others, but for you and me personally. Certainly one of the greatest was the fulfillment of his promise to send his Son to pay our sin debt and to secure our eternal future.

Sometimes life is just too loud to hear such things – such amazing, comforting, personal truths. Let it not be so with you this holiday season – or ever. Take time to listen, to hear, to rejoice and be comforted. Be still,

and be comforted in knowing both your God and just what he has done for you. Amen.

ESV **Micah 5:2-5a** But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. ³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴ And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. ⁵ And he shall be their peace.

ESV **Hebrews 10:5-10** Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; ⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. ⁷ Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'" ⁸ When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), ⁹ then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He does away with the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

ESV **Luke 1:5-23** In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. ⁸ ¶ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." ¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." ²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. ²³ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.



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The Fourth Sunday in Advent – December 22, 2024

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 73 (Stanzas 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Micah 5:2-5a) When all of the prophecies concerning the Promised Messiah are assembled from throughout the Old Testament, the picture that is drawn is strikingly precise and unambiguous. Mankind could and should have known a great deal about Jesus long before he was ever born. In this lesson mankind was even told the city of his birth. Jesus Christ is indeed the promised Messiah.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 8 (Supplement Page 27)

The New Testament Lesson: (Hebrews 10:5-10) It takes a bit of concentration and thought to follow the inspired truth of our second reading, but it is obviously well worth the effort. The Book of Hebrews does a masterful job of explaining just how the entire Old Testament, with its prescribed rules and sacrifices, all pointed always and only to Jesus Christ. Here we are taught that since "burnt offerings and sacrifices" could not pay for sins, Jesus did away with such things by offering himself as the perfect, holy sacrifice for man's sin.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – (Projected on Screens)

The Installation of the 2025 Church Council

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 738 (LSB)

"Lord of All Hopefulness"

The Sermon – Text: Luke 1:5-23 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Sin and Forgiven Both Have an I"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 702 (Stanzas 1-4, 6) (Brown Hymnal)

"As Angels Joyed with One Accord"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 73 (Stanzas 5) (Red Hymnal)

"Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here!
To our Visitors seeking Holy Communion – In obedience to God's Word, we practice "Close Communion." This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting anyone to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word, not in judgment of anyone's Christian faith.

Attendance – Sunday (36) Average (37) Wednesday (21)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Tuesday	-5:00 p.m.	– Christmas Eve Service
Wednesday	-10:00 a.m.	– Christmas Day Service
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Pastor George Dumann is considering the call to Faith of Manchester (St. Louis area). Pastor Del Maas is considering the call to St. Stephen of Mountain View (San Francisco area).

Christmas Schedule – Our Christmas Eve service is scheduled for 5pm this Tuesday, followed by our Christmas Day service on Wednesday at 10am. Please note that there is no midweek Bible Study this week or next.

Church Council Installation – Both the 2025 Church Council and the Board of Elders of St Paul are scheduled to be installed this morning. Members of the Church Council include Brian Fetting, Mark Johnson, Mick Johnson, Keith Mantz, Timothy Meyer, and Phil Pfennig. Members of the Board of Elders are Mark Johnson, Timothy Meyer, and Phil Pfennig.