

Midweek Advent Vespers #1
St. Luke 1:1-25
December 4th, 2024
Sts. Peter and Paul Ev. Lutheran Church, UAC
Simpsonville, SC
Pastor Jerald Dulas

He Had Seen a Vision

In Nomine Iesu!

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Sermon Text:

“And the people were waiting for Zacharias, and they marvelled while he tarried in the temple. And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: and he continued making signs unto them, and remained dumb. And it came to pass, when the days of his ministration were fulfilled, he departed unto his house.”

Prayer in Pulpit before Sermon:

O Lord, send out Thy Light and Thy Truth, let them lead us. O Lord, open Thou my lips, that my mouth may show forth Thy praise. O Lord, graciously preserve me, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected. Amen.

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior + Jesus Christ. Amen.

My dear friends, as was said this past Sunday, the season of Advent, a penitential season, is all about our Lord's coming. In this season, we focus upon our Lord + Jesus coming to us poor, miserable sinners in our flesh, but without our sin. We focus upon the Savior and Redeemer of the world coming to His Church. We focus upon the King and Ruler of all things coming again on the Last Day to take us from this vale of tears to our eternal home in Heaven. It is because of our Lord's coming to us that this season is a penitential season, a season wherein we reflect upon our unworthiness and sin. We are not worthy of our Lord's coming to us. He does not come to us on account of anything which we have done or merited. He comes to us solely out of love and mercy. This will be our focus this season as we prepare for the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord.

Our Lord's coming to this earth in our flesh produces one of two responses in those who hear this great good news: it either sparks disbelief or faith. A person will either believe that the Lord + Jesus has come to redeem and save them, or they will doubt it. There really can be no other option. In our readings for the Midweek Advent Services, we have these two examples laid out for us from the Gospel readings taken from the first chapter of the Evangelist St. Luke's Gospel. Tonight, we hear of the unbelief of Zacharias, and next week we will hear of the faith of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The angel Gabriel, he who stands in the presence of the Lord God, is sent to both Zacharias and the Blessed Virgin. One receives his message gladly, the other does not.

St. Luke, the Evangelist, paints the scene for us. We are told that Zacharias was a priest, of the order of Abijah. Even his wife, Elisabeth, was a daughter of Aaron the first high priest. This means that Zacharias would know the Law. He would know about the promise of a Messiah to be sent to the lost people of Israel. He is even in the temple of the Lord, doing his ministrations as a priest at the time of the visitation of the angel Gabriel. He is offering incense. This is somewhat passed over quickly by St. Luke as a small detail, but there is a significance to this official act of Zacharias. He is offering incense

while the people of the Lord God stand outside offering up prayers.

This has always been the purpose of offering incense; it is associated with the prayers of the people. The people had gathered at the time of the offering of incense to pray. This is why we offer incense during our prayer offices of Matins and Vespers. Incense has always been a symbol of the prayers of the people coming before the presence of the Lord God.

It is during this act of the priestly office of Zacharias that the angel Gabriel appears to him. Make one note about this coming of the angel Gabriel: unlike with the Blessed Virgin Mary, the angel Gabriel does not introduce himself by name right away. He gets right to the purpose of his coming. He was sent by the Lord God to announce to Zacharias, during the hour of incense, during the hour of prayer, that his prayer has been answered. What is his prayer? That he and his wife Elisabeth might be granted a child in their old age. In short, he is asking for a miracle, because as St. Luke tell us, Elisabeth was barren, and they were both stricken in years. The time for a baby to be born to them in a natural way has come and gone. They will not be having a child, except by some miracle.

The angel Gabriel tells Zacharias that his and Elisabeth's prayers have been answered. She will bear a son, and they will call his name John, which means "God is gracious." The Lord God shows grace to Zacharias and Elisabeth in granting them a son in their old age, when Elisabeth was considered barren. Their prayers have been answered. They asked for a miracle, and the Lord God is providing one. But what is the response of Zacharias? He does not believe it. He lets reason and logic get in the way. He even says as much, "Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years."

He had been praying for a miracle, and when the miracle is granted, he does not believe it. It would be easy to rake Zacharias over the coals for his unbelief, but if we were honest with ourselves, our reaction would not be much different. Mankind is adept at letting reason and logic get in the way of the Lord's miracles. Just take for example the two sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. How many people consider Holy Baptism to be nothing but a symbolic washing? Or how many people when looking at the Holy Communion only see bread and wine? They use logic and reason to do away with the what the Word of the Lord God teaches, that His Word is attached to the water to make it a washing of redemption and renewal of the Holy Ghost. By His Word the bread and wine do not remain bread and wine only, but are indeed our Lord's Body and Blood. And because these things are not simple elements only, but connected to the Word of the Lord God, they give and impart that which the Lord God promises, forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation.

If people so easily dismiss the Lord's work in the sacraments, it is not hard for us to see how Zacharias dismisses the words of the angel Gabriel. Notice, my dear friends, that the angel Gabriel does not mention his name, which means "God is my strength," until after Zacharias tells him that the great news which the angel just told him cannot be true. By saying his name, he invokes the authority of the Lord God. Zacharias, who is a priest of the Lord in charge of proclaiming the good news of the promised Messiah, who is burning incense to the Lord God in the temple, while the people pray, will be stricken dumb and mute. He will not be able to proclaim any good word to the people. His ability to preach is taken away from him.

Because he let reason and logic ruin the promise, he will be unable to speak. And rightfully so, for Zacharias has just been told by the angel Gabriel that not only will he have a son named John, but this son will be the forerunner of the Christ. Zacharias is the first person to hear that the Messiah will be coming right after the birth of his son John. He should be rejoicing! He should be shouting for joy! But he only has doubts and excuses. How much like this unbelieving world is Zacharias! We preach that the Lord + Jesus is coming, indeed that He has already come, and continues to come to us through His precious Word and Sacraments daily, and yet, such news is glossed over as white noise. The world

has heard this message before, but they refuse to hear and see the signs which point out that the Lord is coming soon.

Zacharias was no different. He probably heard from his youth about the coming of the promised Messiah, and this promise had been preached for some three thousand years. It is understandable that such good news would fall upon deaf ears. We stand today about two thousand years after our Lord + Jesus walked the earth. He promised that He would return again on the Last Day. As that Day quickly approaches, people get bored with that news. They have heard it before, but see no results. This is why our Lord would have us continue to watch and pray, for the time quickly comes. This is why in this season of Advent we focus upon the three ways our Lord + Jesus comes to us. Every year we focus upon our Lord's coming as a reminder that He is indeed coming to us.

The doubting of the message to Zacharias of a miracle birth to him and his wife Elisabeth is accompanied by another miracle. He is made mute. When his son John is born, he would speak the canticle which is especially appointed for this season of Advent, the *Benedictus*. This song proclaims how this boy John would grow to be the forerunner of the Christ. He would prepare the way for the Messiah of the Lord. Zacharias would be filled with faith to believe the promise spoken to him by the angel Gabriel, and he would confess it in song.

We too, my dear friends, have been given miracles to strengthen our faith in times of doubt. We have been given the blessed Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In them we have been given the great spiritual gifts that grant faith and life. When we daily remember our Holy Baptism, and that by it our sins have been washed away, our faith is strengthened to continue to hope in the coming of our Lord and Savior. When we come to this holy altar and receive our Lord's true and substantial Body and Blood in, with, and under bread and wine, our faith is strengthened to believe that our sins have been forgiven, and that we will one day join all the saints in the Lord's heavenly Kingdom.

Therefore, my dear friends, let us shake off the seeds of doubt that come from prolonged waiting for our Lord's coming. Let us lift up our voices in prayer accompanied by the incense in this place, and pray that the Lord + Jesus might strengthen our faith by His means of grace, and that He might grant our prayer to come quickly and take us from this vale of tears to our eternal home in Heaven. For the promise has been preached to us in the Word of the Lord God. He has sent His angel, His messenger, to preach into our ears that His promises are true. We know this for He has already fulfilled His promise to us and has sent to us His Only-Begotten Son, our Lord + Jesus, the Christ, Who suffered and died for the sins of us and all mankind, so that all who believe on Him might have forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation. Thanks be to the Lord God! In the Name of our Lord + Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit after Sermon:

Almighty God, be pleased to accompany Thy Word with Thy Holy Spirit and grant that Thy Word would increase faith in us; bring into the Way of Truth all such as have erred; turn the hearts of the unrepentant; and for sake of Thy Name grant succor to all heavy hearts and those who are heavy-laden, that they may through the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ be relieved and preserved so that they succumb not to the temptation of despair but rather that they gain the victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with the Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

The Votum:

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!