

*Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. <sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. <sup>16</sup> Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Luke 1:11-17*

### Jesus Comes by Faith Alone

What is the point of Advent? Every year, we have these three midweek services. We set up our Advent wreath and maybe you do the same thing at home. We sing hymns like “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” If you find the church year to be meaningful, you enjoy these special traditions. But what does it all mean? Is this just the start of the Christmas season? Well, certainly, Advent and Christmas are closely related. Advent is a kind of “pre-Christmas” season. The word comes from a Latin word which means “coming” or “arrival” and this season takes us back to God’s Old Testament people as they waited for the promised Savior to arrive. This season is all about hopes and promises fulfilled, so as we anticipate celebrating the birth of Christ, we remember that he comes again in the gospel and at the end of time. This year, our midweek services are focusing on that idea of Jesus coming into our hearts. Our theme for the services this year is, “Advent Means Coming” and tonight, we want to use the words that the Angel Gabriel spoke to Zechariah to focus on how we receive him when he comes. **Jesus comes by faith alone.**

#### I.

Before Christ was born, even before the angel Gabriel told Mary that she was going to have a baby by the power of God, Gabriel announced another miracle birth: that of John the Baptist. Zechariah, his father, was a priest. The priests were divided into twenty-four divisions which took turns serving in the temple in Jerusalem for a week at a time. In the temple, there were two inner rooms. The more important one was the Most Holy Place, where only the high priest could go and that only once a year. But there was another room called the Holy Place. Ordinary priests could go in there. In the Holy Place there was an altar for burning incense. Twice a day, a priest would go in and burn incense to the Lord. They took turns doing this and each division was so large that a priest only got to do it once in his lifetime.

When Zechariah finally got his chance to go into the Holy Place and burn incense, something special happened. The angel Gabriel appeared to him beside the altar of incense. He brought incredible news: Zechariah’s wife Elizabeth was going to have a baby! Now, that would certainly be good news to most couples, even today. But women get pregnant every day. What made this so special? Zechariah and Elizabeth were too old to have children. They had always wanted to have children and they had clearly prayed for a child, but it had never happened. Now, physically, it was too late. But God announced a miracle: Elizabeth would conceive and a baby would be born and they were to name him John.

Now that my wife and I are at the point in our lives when we aren’t expecting any more children, I have an inkling of how surprising this must have been to Zechariah. In fact, if you know the story, you know that he didn’t believe it. It was just too good to be true and so the angel took away his power of speech until this promise was fulfilled. But the point here is more than just a baby being born. The baby was born in this way to set him apart from all other children. The angel said that John would be great in God’s sight and that he would **“go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah.”** He was the last Old Testament prophet, the one chosen to announce that Christ was here.

His mission was all about faith. But John didn’t come to create that faith himself. He didn’t come to teach people how to accept Jesus or how to make a personal decision for Christ. John came to be God’s instrument as the Holy Spirit created faith. To do that, he himself would need faith. The angel promised, **“He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.”** This is a place where our NIV Bible doesn’t serve us as well as it could. The new version of it does better. It says, **“He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before**

**he is born.”** The Greek literally says, “From his mother’s womb.” The point here is that John would believe in Jesus even before he was born. Do you remember how he demonstrated that? Six months later, Mary showed up on Elizabeth’s door, newly pregnant with the Son of God in her womb. As soon as she greeted Elizabeth, John the Baptist, still in his mother’s womb, leaped for joy! His Savior had just come in! He leaped because he rejoiced in what Christ would do for him. He had faith.

Now, how did that happen? We can’t say any more than Luke tells us – he was filled with the Holy Spirit. But that is enough, because it is the Holy Spirit who gives us sinners faith in Christ. Ordinarily, he does it through means, through the gospel in word and sacrament. In John’s case he did something special. But that faith was still totally and completely a gift from God. John didn’t make a decision for Christ in his mother’s womb. God reached into his heart and gave him faith. He gave him trust in his Savior.

The fact that John believed even before he was born teaches us some very important things about faith. Faith is not first of all a cognitive process. It’s not an opinion. It’s not knowledge. Faith begins in the heart. Now, if I have faith, it does take captive every thought, as St. Paul says. But even someone with a limited ability to understand can believe in Jesus. In my experience, simple Christians who just trust their Savior often make a better confession of faith than very gifted and intelligent pastors and professors. In fact, sometimes I fear clergymen who are too gifted. We sinners love the sound of our own voices too much. Faith is about trusting God’s promises, not about how smart I am.

Faith can live in the heart of a baby, but that faith does need to be fed and educated as that child grows. Faith can live in the heart of a person who is developmentally disabled or who suffered brain damage as a result of an illness or an accident. Faith lives in our hearts when we’re sleeping or unconscious. Faith can live in the heart of person who is lost in a fog of dementia and who can no longer talk to us or give a clear confession. Faith is gift of God and he sustains that gift through the gospel. So if you die in your sleep, if you get into a car accident and spend a year in a vegetative state and then die, if you drift away from us and no longer recognize your own children, that gift of God is still yours. Christ still died and rose for you. The faith God planted in your heart will still bring you home to heaven.

Faith is God’s miracle cure to sin and unbelief. It doesn’t come from us – God reaches into our hearts and gives us faith. We can’t say anything about how he gives it, except that it comes through the gospel. But faith is the hand that grasps the gift God gives us in the gospel. It grasps Jesus. **Jesus comes by faith alone, faith that comes by a miracle.**

## II.

When God does that miracle, he follows it with one miracle after another. In fact, you can say, **Jesus comes by faith alone, faith that works wonders.** The angel Gabriel promised those wonders for all those who would benefit from John’s ministry. That began with Zechariah himself. Gabriel promised that John would be **“a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth.”** Certainly, after all these years, a baby was going to bring Zechariah joy. But the angel was talking about more than that. He was talking about John’s mission. God had promised a messenger who would come to announce the arrival of the Savior. John was that messenger. People rejoiced to see him because it meant they were about to see Jesus.

You can see the heart of that joy in the way Zechariah reacted to the angel. When the angel appeared, Zechariah was afraid. Like angels almost always do, the first words out of Gabriel’s mouth were, **“Do not be afraid.”** Zechariah clearly was a believer. He had dedicated his life to serving God and he was waiting for the Messiah to come. Why would he be afraid of an angel? Because he was a sinner, just like you and me. Gabriel was holy. In his presence, Zechariah couldn’t help but feel his sin and guilt and fear God’s judgment. But the angel’s words were full of gospel: there was no reason for him to fear. God was moving to take away his sin. His own child would announce the coming of the Savior who would pay for all of Zechariah’s sins and bring him home to heaven. That Messiah would take away all reason for Zechariah to fear God’s wrath.

What God promised Zechariah he has fulfilled for us. Jesus did come six months after John was born. When the time was right, he preached and taught and pointed the world to heaven. Then he died. That life and that death were what we sinners need. Earlier this month, the company where my wife works did an angel tree for kids who wouldn’t have much of Christmas unless other people stepped up. Each child was allowed to list some things they would like for Christmas. My wife got the name of a twelve year old girl. She didn’t ask for toys. She asked for things like a hat and scarf and mittens. She asked for clothes. I’m sure some of that was wanting to be fashionable. But I also believe that that girl is old enough to know that mittens and a scarf and a

hat will be a real blessing to her on cold mornings waiting for the school bus. When she gets them, they will give her real joy. Well, Jesus' perfect life and his innocent death mean that God will call us holy on Judgment Day. There is nothing we need more than that. There is no greater joy that we can have because it means that finally, we will be free from all sorrow and pain here and we will live with him forever. John came to announce that truth. Trusting that truth gives us that joy.

The faith God gives has other effects, too. The angel said that John would bring many of the people of Israel back to the Lord. He said that he would turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and that he would lead the disobedient to the paths of righteousness. All that truly is a miracle of God's grace, because we sinners are selfish and egotistical by nature. But knowing Jesus makes our lives different. Trusting in him as your Savior brings you back to the Lord and awakens a desire to live for him. It awakens a desire to have your children live for him. Christian parents care deeply that their children know the Lord. Faith in Christ causes people who have spent years pursuing pleasure and money and personal gain to view all those things as utter foolishness and to pursue instead a life of service to God. That is true wisdom, wisdom that will last beyond the end of this world. Only a miracle of faith could make those changes.

Only God can do that miracle. John wasn't going to do it. He was just going to be the tool God would use to do it. The Holy Spirit was going to do that miracle. He still does it today. He does work through us and our ministry. He works through Christian parents whose hearts are turned to their children. He works through every way that we proclaim the good news. But he does the work. And he makes us new and different. And it is all a precious gift of God. Advent means coming. Jesus came in Bethlehem. He will come again on Judgment Day. And he comes into our hearts through the gospel. He comes by faith alone. Praise God that he has come to your heart and given you that faith! Amen.