Prepare Him Room

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Luke 1:5-20

December 3, 2017
Today is the first Sunday of Advent. The word “advent” originates from the Latin *adventus*, which means “coming.” Advent is a season in the church year when we prepare for Christ’s coming. We began worship today by lighting the first advent candle. Some of you will begin opening little windows in your Advent calendars to mark the days from Advent to Christmas.

Yet, who are we kidding? Advent does not stand a chance in this commercial-ized culture. Holiday ads have been running since the first week in November, ever since we put away our Jack-O’lanterns. The shopping season is in full tilt. Does Black Friday or Cyber Monday ring a bell?

Enough already! I am going to challenge you to live differently this Christmas.

Bernard of Clairvaux, in a 12th century sermon, spoke about the three comings of Christ: his first coming at Bethlehem, his second coming in our hearts daily and his third coming at the end of time. We live between the first coming and his ultimate return. We have opportunity to welcome his coming into our hearts this Christmas. But, first, the story.

Luke begins his gospel (gospel means good story) with an account of an elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. They are both descendants of Israel’s first priest, Aaron, Moses’ brother. Luke describes this couple as blameless in the sight
of God. Blameless! He also reports they are childless. Back in the day, having children was a sign of God’s favor while infertility was a sign of God’s disfavor. This is not the biblical view—whether or not a couple can conceive is most assuredly not a sign of God’s favor or disfavor. Neverthe-
less, it was the prevailing view in Zechariah’s day.

The Jewish people gathered every morning for prayer in the outer courtyard of the temple. A single priest would carry incense in a censer from the altar in the outer courtyard to the Holy Place of the temple. The Holy Place is not to be confused with the Most Holy Place that the high priest would enter once a year on Yom Kippur. The Holy Place was a middle space in the temple where the priest would offer incense to signify the prayers that God’s people offered up to God. Note to self, the frankincense and myrrh given to the first family by the magi were two of the ingredients used in making incense.

Since the supply of priests exceeded the demand, priests were chosen by lottery for the honor of burning incense in the temple. The lot fell to Zechariah one day. It was every priest’s dream to be awarded this sacred honor.

We pick up the action in verse 10 when Zechariah enters the Holy Place. As he approaches the golden altar, an angel of the Lord, a messenger of God, emerges from the Most Holy Place. Zechariah freaks out! The angel announces, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard.”
What prayer? Zechariah must have prayed for deliverance for his people in this moment. Whether he included a prayer for a child is anybody’s guess. It certainly represents an unspoken prayer this couple has been carrying for years.

The angel continues, “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you are to call him John” (1:13). “He will be great in the sight of the Lord” (1:14). “He will minister before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children” (1:17). This last phrase, “to turn the hearts of the parents to their children” matches the last words of the Old Testament. The prophet Malachi anticipates “one to come who will turn parents to their children and children back to parents” (Malachi 4:5-6). One practical dimension of this Messiah’s coming will be a restoration of families.

Zechariah asks the angel for more proof: “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is getting along in years” (1:18). The angel declares, “I am Gabriel” which stands in bold relief to Zechariah’s words, “I am an old man.” In effect, the angel says, “You want a sign, Zechariah. I’ll give you a sign. You will be unable to speak until further notice.”

The people gathered outside in the courtyard wonder what is taking Zechariah so long. When he reappears to offer the traditional priestly blessing—“The Lord bless and keep you, the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you, the Lord lift His face toward you and give you peace”
(Numbers 6:24-26), he cannot utter a sound. People assume he has seen a vision.

Sure enough, Elizabeth and Zechariah give birth to a son just as Gabriel said they would (1:57). When it comes time to name their son, everybody expects them to name him “little Zechariah” after his father. Zechariah motions for a tablet and writes the words, “His name is John” (1:62). Suddenly, Zechariah regains his voice and breaks forth into an oracle about this son of promise who will prepare the way for the Lord (1:76).

Fast-forward thirty years. John is now a grown man and is known by the moniker John the Baptist. He travels the countryside baptizing people and preaching words from Isaiah: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him” (3:4).

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? Let me challenge you to make Christmas different this year. Decide to make Christmas less commercialized and more Christ-centered this year. Resolve to make it less frenzied and more spirit-filled. Does not your heart yearn for this? Cut back on superfluous stuff and prepare the way of the Lord.

Remember Bernard of Clairvaux’s sermon on Christ’s three comings—his first coming at Bethlehem, his second coming into our hearts and his third coming in glory at the end of time. I said that we live between the first coming of Christ and his return at the end of time. We have opportunity
this Christmas for Christ’s coming into our hearts. Ask yourself—will there be room in my heart for Christ this Christmas?

I have four suggestions:

First suggestion. Take the card from your pew racks that lists opportunities for spiritual enrichment this Advent season. You will notice our choir will offer a portion of Handel’s Messiah this afternoon. Part 1 of Handel’s Messiah is an ideal way to begin Advent since it focuses on ancient prophecies about the Messiah’s coming, his birth and remarkable three-year ministry. Every single word of this sacred choral piece is Scripture set to music.

Parents of young children, notice the next event listed on this card—our family celebration next Sunday afternoon. This musical nativity tied to a service project component is an excellent way for young families to enter into the true meaning of the season.

My second suggestion is relevant to young families. Our Children’s Ministry has prepared an Advent Family Devotional. You can find this devotional in a basket in the main hallway outside the Great Hall. This is a great way to engage your children in the real meaning of Christmas.

Third suggestion. Our adult ministry has prepared devotions this Advent season to coincide with our Sunday sermons. This devotional is available both in print form in
the narthex and online. The focus of this week’s readings coincides with the first chapter of Luke’s gospel. The purpose of this devotional is to help you center your day in prayer and reading the Word.

My fourth suggestion has to do with practicing generosity. Earlier in worship, David shared with you news about the investment our church made in Colombia, South America. Your generosity made it possible for our church to plant two churches in a rural area of Colombia. One such church has begun to meet in a small farming village of 200 people. Your giving made it possible to drill a well 50 feet into the ground so the people in Morindo can have running water for the first time. Talk about a good return on investment! Planting two churches and drilling a well is a good return on investment. Your generosity to Christ’s mission at VPC is worth your investment.

Let me circle back to my original question. Will there be room in your hearts for Christ this Christmas? How ironic that there was no room at the inn for the first family at Bethlehem. Is there room in your hearts for Christ? Or will he become crowded out like every other year?

Isaac Watts was a prolific 17th century hymn writer. When Isaac was young, the only music sung in churches were Old Testament psalms set to music. He found the somber singing of the Psalms monotonous and rather joyless. After one Sunday morning service, Isaac, then 15, complained about the atrocious worship in song. His father challenged him to write some hymns of his own. He returned to worship that same
evening with the first hymn he had written. He went on to write 750 hymns, one of which is the Christmas carol *Joy to the World!* One line in the carol bears mentioning here, “Let every heart prepare him room.” Is there room in your hearts for Jesus?

(8:00/11:00) This “prepare him room” reference in *Joy to the World!* brought to mind another old hymn this week entitled *Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne.* While the hymn has a rather ponderous title, Emily Elliott wrote it as a children’s hymn. She wrote 140 hymns for use in the church where her father served as pastor. She wrote this hymn for children and the choir at her father’s Anglican Church in London. The hymn contrasts the line in Luke’s gospel about “no room in the inn” with the refrain, “O come to my heart, Lord Jesus. There is room in my heart for thee.”

(9:30) The song our music team will be singing during communion, *Prepare Him Room,* picks up on this same theme of “Let every heart prepare him room” in the beloved *Joy to the World!* carol. This song was included in a Christmas CD *Prepare Him Room* that was prepared three years ago in conjunction with an Advent devotional curriculum for children. The song returns often to the refrain, “Prepare him room. Prepare him room. Let the king of glory come in.” The third verse begins, “Oh, our hearts, as busy as Bethlehem, Hear him knock. Don’t say there’s no room in the inn.”