

## **“Announce! The Promise of Return”**

*Reading: Luke 1:5-25, 67-80*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

During the summer of my first year in seminary, I had the opportunity to work and preach in Glacier National Park in Montana. It was an incredible summer, one of those times that you look forward to and will remember for the rest of your life. The plan was to spend about three months there, but about two months in, there were wildfires in the area that got so bad that they shut down the park and most of the local businesses closed. It was somewhat like the anticipation of the arrival of Hurricane Sandy recently, when the time just drags on and the only thing anyone can think or talk about is what might happen. Time seemed to slow down and it seemed like those fires were looming over us for months, when in fact it was probably only about a week or so. But eventually my work closed down, and since I no longer had a job and my housing was provided by my employer, it was time for me to leave.

But I had a month of my summer left, so I looked into some other opportunities. I could have gotten a similar job down at Grand Teton National Park, or it was possible that I could have gone and worked on the other side of Glacier, where there were no fires. But by that point, after all of the anticipation and the waiting and the uncertainty and the worrying, I was just worn down. I just wanted to go home, though home was about a 32-hour drive away. Adventure and excitement could have awaited me, and now I kind of wish I'd stayed out West for that last month, but at the time, I just wanted to go home.

Maybe you've had those moments in your life, too. Those moments when things simply have not gone according to plan, circumstances have worn you down, maybe the grass was not all that much greener when you got to the other side of the fence, or maybe you outright crashed and burned. Whatever happened, I'd bet you've had those moments when you just wanted to go home.

I think that's a big part of why the parable of the prodigal son is maybe the most famous, most quoted, most effective of all of the parables of Jesus. It's a story we can all relate to: the story of a son who wanders off in search of fortune and glory, insulting his small-town father and homebody brother, who soon finds himself friendless and destitute far from home when the money runs out and the excitement wears off, who literally ends up living in a pig sty before he comes to his senses and decides to risk going home. Even if you've never gone to the extremes of the Prodigal Son, even if you're not a big traveler and the thought of adventure makes you break out in hives, you've probably had one of those moments when you've been worn down and just want to go home. Maybe you've been physically exhausted or emotionally worn down, but as strange as it sounds to say it, I hope that at some point in your life you've been spiritually worn down, when you've felt a fatigue in your soul, and you've ached for a home that you may not even know for sure exists.

One of the main reasons we are here as a church, one of the main announcements that the church has proclaimed all throughout the ages, is the message that you can come home. No matter how far you've gone, no matter how messy your pig sty is, no matter how much you've squandered or how tired the world has made you, you can come home. You were made for a home that you've never really seen, a home with God, and He's giving you the promise that you can return home.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, the first Sunday in a new year of the Christian calendar, the time when we begin once more to re-live the story of how God has saved us. Advent begins four weeks in advance of Christmas to give us some time to prepare ourselves to truly celebrate the first arrival of Jesus and to anticipate His return. He has arrived, and He will come again, and so we need to make ourselves ready for our King. And as we all know from fairy tales and cartoons, any good King is always preceded by heralds, announcers, people who go before him and blow trumpets and tell the subjects to make way for the king. That's true of Jesus, too. As we read the gospels that tell His story, we see lots of different times when angels show up and make announcements to the different characters in the story to tell them that the King is coming. So this year for Advent we're going to be focusing on the announcements those angels made. How did they describe Him? How did they want people to anticipate Him? What were the most important things about this coming King that people needed to know before He arrived?

I've learned all too well over the last six years of pastoring, as well as from my own example before that, that people do not get excited about announcements. You've got to have them, but they're kind of a necessary evil. We used to have our announcements at the beginning of our worship service, so that was kind of a buffer for some people — in case you were running late, don't worry, you only missed the announcements. Or now that we have them at the end of the service, I can tell that some of you are wishing I'd just hurry up and dismiss everyone, because the service is over and it's just the announcements, and they're pretty boring. When I was a Boy Scout at summer camp, when it was time for announcements the counselors would always sing songs and do skits about announcements so that at least a few of us would pay attention. But really, announcements are not a necessary evil, they're actually a vital part of the life of our church family. They may not charge you up as much as other parts of worship, but hopefully you do get excited when you hear about how God is at work in our congregation and how our body of believers is alive in Christ.

Announcements tell us things we need to know. They connect us with what's going on. An announcement is not an event in itself, but it points us to something worth talking about and it tells us what's worth announcing. It builds expectation and helps us know how to prepare. Announcements expect a response of one sort or the other; you have to choose what you will do because of it. This is why all of those angels announced the birth of Jesus: His arrival was worth announcing and it demands a response.

And one of the first things we see them announcing is that Jesus will offer that promise of return. To those who have that deep-down ache for coming home, this King born at Christmas calls them to come home. We read this wonderful story about Zechariah, the man who was married to Jesus' mother's cousin, Elizabeth. Zechariah receives an announcement from an angel that is actually about Zechariah's soon-to-be-born son, John, who will prepare the way for Jesus. John's task as he grows older will be to "bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God," and "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." John, who will grow up to be known as John the Baptist, will be the one to get the people in shape for Jesus' coming.

We have to remember that at that point in their history, the people of Israel were eagerly awaiting their Messiah. Hundreds of years earlier, they had so damaged their relationship with God that He sent them into exile to straighten them out. It's like they had done so much damage to their dream home that their landlord evicted them, and life hadn't been quite the same ever since. Though

Zechariah and his people were at this point technically living in their homeland, there was still some debate about whether their exile had ever really ended. God did not seem to be present with them in quite the same way as He had been in the past. So when this angel tells him that it's almost time for the people to be prepared for their Lord, it's an announcement of a restoration of the home that they had been desperately longing for for centuries.

We read Zechariah's song of praise after John was born, and Zechariah directly connects this child and the coming Christ child with God's faithfulness to past generations. God has done this "as He said through His holy prophets of long ago." This announcement shows God's "mercy to our ancestors," and proves that He "remembers His holy covenant, the oath He swore to our father Abraham." Zechariah knows that this child represents a completion of the age-long cry of his people to return home.

We could also look at what John had to say when he grew up and started making his own announcements. In Matthew 3 he comes across as a pretty eccentric character, and his message does not at first sound like a promise to those who want to come home. He shouts at the religious elite for being a "brood of vipers," and he says threatening, apocalyptic things like "the ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." He talks about how Jesus will separate the wheat from the chaff using "unquenchable fire." That doesn't sound quite like a nice, comforting call to come home. But the message really is a call to turn around, change your course, come home before it's too late. "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance," he tells them, which is a hopeful message: it means that repentance is possible. You can come home, if you just turn around now and come.

The message of Advent is an announcement to prepare. The King is coming. It's not too late. There is hope of returning home. Yes, Jesus is coming in judgment, but judgment is good news for those who have repented, turned away from their sin and foolishness, and turned toward Christ. There is hope in our coming King, a promise of return for *anyone* who will come. This Advent, come home.



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