

ADVENTure: The Wayback Machine
By Jason Huff
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Genesis 3:1-15; Malachi 3:1-4,4:5-6; Luke 1:5-17

Today's final reading is Luke 1:5-17. May God add His blessings to the reading of His holy, infallible Word. "In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 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 call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 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 before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Repetition – is it good or is it bad? We remember songs, whether we like them or not, when they're repetitive. We go over things in school over and over again; we may call it "review" instead of repetition, but it's the same thing. I heard last week that practice doesn't make perfect; practice makes permanent. You practice doing the same thing wrong, that bad habit is going to become permanent, but not perfect.

We come to church each week and there's a repetition to what we do. The words change, the songs change, but each week we come to repeat the age-old story of redemption. We need to hear it over and over again because we so easily forget. Repeat something you enjoy a couple of times and you might have it down pat. But with something as complicated and life-changing as faith in Jesus Christ, it takes time to get it all down.

I bring all of this up because the one season where everything stays virtually the same from year to year in most churches is Advent. It's become a four-to-five week season when we go over the elements of the Christmas story – the announcement first to Elizabeth about John the Baptist and then the announcement to Mary about Jesus. The dream of Joseph, the trip to Bethlehem, the angels appearing to shepherds who come to visit, the wise men who follow the star, the flight to Egypt. Most Christians who've spent a few years in church have heard these stories repeated over and over again. And what's funny is that they aren't anywhere near the most important stories in Scripture. Even the original celebration of Advent was meant to use Jesus' first coming as an opportunity to ponder and pray about His second coming.

And being in touch with a lot of preachers around the country, I know that this is either a pastor's most favorite or least favorite season. Some pastors love it because they get the chance to recycle old material. It really frees up your schedule when you don't have to do any sermon prep and the Christmas musical takes up one of your four Sundays! But for some of us, we don't want to repeat ourselves. We know that God is alive and exciting, and we don't want to bore our congregations with the same old material presented the same old way. But it's hard to meet the desire to return to the comfort of the manger story and still to do something fresh.

So we're going to think of this time a little differently this year. We're calling it the ADVENTure. Because that's really what Advent should be – an adventure of pondering the Messiah's story across Scripture and across time. Our lives with God aren't always thrilling; they're hard work, sometimes mundane. And yet there's the adventure of knowing that Christ is leading us, that we are on a path, that we are not sitting still but slowly but surely climbing the mountains of faith as we walk with Him each day.

I'm going to look at the next three weeks specifically as a time travel adventure. Do you remember *Mr. Peabody and Sherman*? It was a classic cartoon in the '50s and '60s recently revived as a movie. Mr. Peabody is a super-smart gentleman of a dog who has a pet boy named Sherman. And they'd travel through time with the use of a contraption called the Wayback Machine. They'd stop here, there, and everywhere on their journeys trying to discover what historical characters were really like. Sometimes the histories would get mixed and they'd have to fix things. We actually showed the new movie a year or so ago at Meal and a Movie Night.

Well, today I want us to step back into the Wayback Machine of the Old Testament. This week, we're going to do a crash course in the history of the Jewish expectation of a Messiah. We're not just going to look at predictions of who the Messiah would be – we're going to see how the history of the world itself points us in the direction of the Messiah, how themes that often don't make a lot of sense in the Old Testament suddenly find meaning when taken in light of Jesus, the Messiah who fulfilled the ancient prophecies.

Let's start all the way back at the beginning. God creates humankind, and Adam is its head. What he does will make a difference for everyone who comes after him. And as we know, Adam and Eve break faith with God. They had one job, a job of passive avoidance, and they didn't do it because they thought they could be like God. God could have shut the whole thing down then, but He doesn't. We are worth more than that to Him.

So from the very start, God makes a promise...the seed (singular) of the woman will redeem us from the serpent's power. While the ancient serpent – the devil, Satan, the deceiver – will strike at the heel of God's savior, the savior will crush his head, putting an end to his schemes to destroy us. From the very beginning, God has plans to show us grace through Jesus. There is never a moment that we are without hope. It's just a tiny mustard seed of hope at this point, but it's there.

We move forward to Noah, and we learn that God will indeed save the righteous from destruction. When only Noah and his family were following God, God kept them alive and protected them against the flood. We learn that God is in the saving business.

Move forward to Abraham. Abraham believes God when God tells him to move to the land of Canaan, what we now think of as Israel. And God makes a miracle promise to Abraham – that he and his barren wife Sarah will have a child in extreme old age, and through the children of that child, God will bless the whole world. (It's a promise that the eventual Messiah will be for all people.) God gives a son to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, that's physically impossible for them to have, yet they do. Sound a little familiar yet?

But the hardest part of Abraham's story comes when God orders him to take Isaac and sacrifice him on the mountainside. Abraham is grieved, but he obeys. He takes Isaac to the mountain and pulls out the knife, and just then, God says “no.” For one, God establishes that unlike the other religions surrounding Israel for generations, He does not desire their children on the altar. But it also provides us foreshadowing – what God does not demand of us, what He did not ultimately demand of Abraham, He demands of Himself. Our sons and daughters live because His Son came and died for us.

But the parallels don't stop there. Move forward a few hundred more years in the Wayback Machine. Isaac's son Jacob has 12 sons, one of them is Joseph, they all move to Egypt, and then somewhere in the four hundred years after, all of Abraham's descendants are slaves. God raises up a unique man, Moses. Moses was raised in the palace, the adopted grandson of Pharaoh. He had all the rights and privileges of royalty. Yet Moses sets them aside to join the cause of his people, just as Jesus would one day leave His heavenly throne to come alongside His people and lead them. In fact, Jesus' story parallels Moses' story, even to the point of going up on a mountainside and giving the new law – as Jesus does on the Sermon on the Mount.

At the end of his life, Moses knows that there is an eventual Messiah coming. God has given him some knowledge that Jesus will someday arrive. And he says in Deuteronomy 18, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen.” And not only is Jesus the prophet like Moses, He exceeds Moses. Moses only reflected God's glory for a short time; Jesus is the exact radiance of God's glory. Moses only delivered the law; Jesus was its author. There is no doubt Jesus is the one of whom Moses spoke.

After forty years of leadership, Moses dies, and Joshua leads the Israelites into the promised land. Joshua is a mighty warrior who leads the Israelites into battle for the LORD – you may not know that Joshua's name is the same as Jesus' name in Hebrew. It means, “God saves” or “God delivers.” Yehoshua and Yeshua are variants of one another in Hebrew. And while Joshua was God's means of giving the Holy Land to Israel, our Jesus is God's means of bringing us into His perfect, eternal holy presence.

Over the next four hundred years, in roughly 1400 BC, God establishes a pattern of sending saviors to Israel. Israel forgets about God, they are oppressed by their neighbors, they cry out to God, and God sends a judge to tame the threat and set Israel back on track. Some judges are better than others; some are cowards; others are headstrong and prideful; yet God uses them all. But the four hundred year cycle proves not only that God never forgets His people even in their backsliding, a permanent solution to Israel's unfaithfulness is necessary. It's the only way to end the cycle.

Then we come to the era of Israel's kings around 1000 BC. The people demand a king, even though God speaks through the prophets warning them against it. Yet God does bless the kings that are faithful to Him. And the one who God calls a man after His own heart, David, God uses to establish the basics of the coming Messiah. Pretty much every later era of Israel's history is judged on how it conforms to the vision of David's reign. And God promises that the Messiah will come from David's line.

But more than that, David prophecies in the Psalms about the coming Messiah. In Psalm 2, the coming Messiah is called God's son. In Psalm 16, the Messiah is not allowed to see decay in Sheol – He is resurrected from death. Psalm 22 describes the death and vindication of the Messiah in detail that you wouldn't believe. It describes Jesus' crucifixion, despite the fact that crucifixion as a form of capital punishment wouldn't be invented for several hundred years. The Messiah's rejection as the cornerstone is described in Psalm 118. And in Psalm 110, God speaks to someone David calls his own Lord – which is hard for the Jewish people to understand, since there is no one above David except God Himself. Psalm 110 directly shows that David is a servant of the Messiah who will come after him.

More time passes, and Israel once again falls into patterns of apostasy, of falling away from God. But God sends prophets to lead them back home. And God continues to make promised of a Messiah to them. The prophet Isaiah confirms that the Messiah will be born of a virgin, that He would be a healer, that He would suffer for His people, being pierced and wounded as David described. Isaiah knew that the Messiah would be called a Nazarene, and he taught us that the Messiah would be for the whole world. And perhaps most important, when Isaiah speaks of the Messiah in Isaiah 9, the Messiah is called Mighty God. There is an understanding that the Messiah will somehow be God come to us.

Other prophets get other pieces of the puzzle. Daniel gives the Messiah the title Son of Man, which was Jesus' favorite title for Himself. Hosea shares that the Messiah will be called out of Egypt, as Jesus was after His family fled there after His birth. Zechariah prophecies about events of Jesus' final week on earth. God shared with Malachi that the Messiah would be preceded by a messenger who would act in the spirit and power of Elijah – that would be John the Baptist.

The Messiah is all across the pages of the Old Testament. Either symbols and types of Him are present, people who are foreshadowing Him, or prophecies explaining what we should be looking for. The Old Testament not only testifies as to the history of God's work in His people Israel, it testifies to the need for the Savior and how He will appear and what He will do. Whenever you read the Old Testament, it helps to read it through that lens. When you come across ancient laws that don't seem to make sense to us in the modern day, think about how they show the need for a Savior to take away the guilt of not following every law. When you come across a long list of names in someone's family tree, remember that that family tree shows traces back the ancestry of God's people, including the Messiah promised to be from the line of King David.

So as we wrap up this trip back into the far reaches of time, what should we get out of it? Telling your friend about church today, what can you say you learned? There are two things I'd love for us to get out of our trip through 4,000 years of history before Jesus' birth. The first is confidence: confidence that Jesus is the promised Messiah and, more than that, your Savior.

The prophecies of the Old Testament were written over a great deal of time, which means there was no collusion among the prophets to create a unified body of Messianic predictions. David couldn't talk to Isaiah, and they couldn't talk to Daniel, and they couldn't talk with Malachi. Their prophecies are totally separate from one another. And sometimes, they seem to oppose one another – Hosea says the Messiah is called out of Egypt, Micah says He will be from Bethlehem, Isaiah mentions Him as a Nazarene. Yet all three were correct – Jesus was born in Bethlehem, spent a few years in Egypt, then moved to Nazareth. Jesus fulfills even the most unlikely prophecies, prophecies written centuries before His appearance.

Many statisticians have tried to figure out what mathematical probability it would take for Jesus to fulfill the prophecies about Him. It's been figured as numerically impossible. Even for Jesus to fulfill the prophecies over which He had no personal human control whatsoever is something like 1 to 10 to the 17th power – a billion is 10 to the 9th power!

The Old Testament makes it very easy to believe that Jesus is the Savior He promised to be if we take it on the evidence. We can ignore the evidence, we can write off the predictions as just good guesses, but it makes no sense. It takes a lot more faith to believe that prophecy is a hoax than to look carefully at the evidence and realize that no one could have made this up. The facts agreed upon even by the Jews that turned away from Him show that He fulfilled those prophecies. So have confidence.

The second thing I'd like for us to have this morning is thankfulness: thankfulness that we live on this side of history. Just think about this: for at least four thousand years, everything about the Messiah was a hint, a shadow, a prophecy here, a model there, a type, a foreshadowing. People lived and died their entire lives only with the hope that one day, God would rescue His people through His messiah who would reign forever. Their hopes were tied to a promise that remained unfulfilled throughout their lifetimes.

But we live on the other side of history. We not only have the witness of those four thousand years, we have Jesus himself. We'll talk more about His birth and life next week. But for the last two thousand years, we've had the ability to know Him. We have the clear witness of what He did and what it meant. We have two thousand years of church scholars that have helped us pierce through some of the mysteries. And while the denial of God may be alive and well in America, the evidence is so strong that a person seeking the truth will find Jesus at its center.

I'm looking forward to next week and continuing in the Wayback Machine to Jesus' era. But this week, we can rejoice – we know the Savior. We can see the prophecies in hindsight and know that they are true. And we can have a deep, personal relationship with God through Jesus, the Son of the Father who loves us and all His people throughout all of time.