

“Three Short Years – Pointing Ahead”

Malachi 4:5–6; Mark 1:1–11; John 1:6–9, 19–29

The true story

From Jesus’ birth, we move to the time three decades later when he burst upon the scene, proclaimed and baptized by John the baptizer. A cousin (broad term) of Jesus, John’s own story opens Luke’s gospel, for we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth whom God blessed with a child, one who would “be called the prophet of the Most High . . . [and] go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (Luke 1:16). Nothing will ever be the same, for John will comprehend that Jesus is the “Lamb of God,” ushering in the kingdom of God.



Zechariah and Elizabeth had lived a long time with the disappointment of their childlessness. They were far too old to hold any hope of a baby. Yet, you see, everything was going to be all right. This is their story.

A day like no other

The temple in Jerusalem was the workplace of the priests of Israel. The priestly system was built around animal sacrifice; in the busy festivals of the Jewish year, the Jerusalem priests had their hands full, literally, keeping up with the demands of the populace. Somewhere around 6–4 BC, one of the priests was a very old man named Zechariah who was married to an equally old woman named Elizabeth. Much to their disappointment, the old couple was childless.

One day, as Zechariah’s department was fulfilling its priestly duties, the old man was chosen to enter God’s sanctuary and offer up incense.¹ This was quite an honor for Zechariah and something that he may have waited for his whole life. Nonetheless, Elizabeth and her family had to wait patiently outside.

Alone inside the sanctuary and somewhere during the middle of the ritual, the divine burst in upon Zechariah and all thoughts of the sacred ceremony were set aside. Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, stood on the right side of the altar. Zechariah was terrified. As was the necessary custom among angels, Gabriel told the old man, “Don’t be afraid.” Elizabeth’s and Zechariah’s prayers were about to be answered.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had always strived to lead holy and righteous lives. Not only was Zechariah a temple priest, but Elizabeth was also a descendent of Aaron, brother of Moses and the first high priest of Israel. But still, their lives had been clouded by the sadness and even disgrace of childlessness. This would have fallen especially hard on Elizabeth, as, in their world, a woman’s barrenness was seen to be a reproach from God. Now, Elizabeth was too old for there to be any possibility of a child.

But with God, the impossible becomes the possible. As the old man did his duty, an angel had appeared right in front of him, promising a child. And not just any child. Many people would rejoice at their son’s birth. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit and would lead people back to the Lord. In the spirit of Elijah, their son would make the people ready for the coming Lord.

As you might imagine, Zechariah found all this a bit hard to swallow. As many of us would, he wanted some sign that Gabriel’s message was truly from God. But doubt can be dangerous. Zechariah was struck mute for his lack of faith and would remain so until his son’s birth. When Zechariah emerged from the temple, the crowd understood that he had experienced a vision of some sort because he could do no more than make signs. Elizabeth, of course, would conceive and give birth to a male child. He would grow up to fulfill the vocation given him by God and would be called John the Baptist.

The Birth of John the Baptizer

By the time that Gabriel interrupts Zechariah’s incense offering, the Jews had waited hundreds of years for the arrival of their deliverer, their Messiah. Surely, many Jews had given up hope that they would ever see the decisive acts of God.

¹ In Exodus 30, God commands that the priests of Israel are to burn holy incense (a general term for aromatic plants) in front of the “holy of holies” in the temple. The smoke from the incense would protect the priests from the presence of God. (See also Leviticus 16)

Similarly, Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up hope of ever having children. But just as God burst in upon their lives, giving them a son, God would soon end the Jews' wait and burst in upon human history, bringing it to a climax in Jesus Christ.

As the announcement of John's birth precedes the announcement of his cousin's birth, so Luke tells of us John's birth before he tells us the story of Jesus' birth (see Luke 1:57-80).

When Elizabeth's baby is born, the neighbors are overjoyed. At the infant's circumcision ceremony, he is about to be named Zechariah, after his father, when Elizabeth announces that he is to be named John. Zechariah agrees to the naming and, at that moment, his speech is restored! The story is told throughout the area causing people to wonder, "What then is this child going to be?" They know, as Luke writes, that "indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him." Having recovered his speech, Zechariah pronounces a lengthy blessing upon his son, John. John "will be called the prophet of the Most High" and "will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins."

So there you have it . . . maybe sooner, maybe later, even much later, everything is gonna be all right. It is not trite or a cliché; it is the promise of God that "all things work for good for those who love the Lord" (Romans 8:28).

John comes of age

The prophets of Israel sometimes spoke words of anticipation, looking ahead to the glorious day when God would settle all accounts and put all things right, when all the nations would come streaming to God and live in peace. It is as if the prophets were saying "God will act!" – the future tense. The arrival of God's Messiah will change the world. God will abide with his people as he never had before and all will be right.

With John, we come to the present tense, who preached a message of preparation and repentance and enacted this turning around by washing people in the Jordan River, i.e., baptizing them. John is the prophet who announces that this Day of the Lord is fast upon God's people and they must ready themselves for it. Centuries before another prophet had cried out: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" (Isaiah 40:3) And now John cries out that the time has come. The moment has arrived. What had been future would now be present.

So John calls the people out to the Jordan river. Why there? More than 1200 years before John, Joshua had led the Israelites across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. Ever since, the Jordan River had been a symbol of salvation and hope. In baptizing people in the Jordan River, John was symbolically reenacting the crossing of the river. People came to be washed in the river, to give up their old ways, to be cleansed of their past, to be part of the renewed people of the covenant. Yet . . . John pointed the people to the one "more powerful than I who is coming after me" (v.7) who would baptize, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit (v. 8). In Jesus, entering God's renewed people will be a crossing over from an old life to a new life.

It is difficult for us to grasp just how volatile and violent was the world across which John's words drifted. The additional reading on Israel and Rome may help you see the danger that, at best, lay just beneath the surface. Too often, it came bursting forth spilling blood even within the sacred walls of Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

But John stood out there in the Jordan, the boundary between civilization and the wilderness. He dressed the part: animal skins, living off locusts and honey. Some even mistook him for Elijah. Thus, John the baptizer, laying his eyes on Jesus pronounces that he, this modest man from Galilee, is the One, the long-awaited Lamb of God who had come to reconcile the world to God (John 1:29).

John's message was one not only of immediacy but of anticipation. For he pronounced that Jesus would baptize not with water, not for mere repentance, but with the Holy Spirit, for rebirth. And this Spirit of God, whom the people of God would come to understand as the third person of the Trinitarian God, would be God present with his people, as God had once been, long before. But for a time, so short a time, God would now walk among his people in the flesh. He would teach and love and heal, calling God's people to return to the way of God, for it was time for the whole world to be reconciled to God.

The Spirit of Christ is, in the wonderful words of Gordon Fee, "the evidence of the presence of the future." Not only was the arrival of the Christ a fulfillment of God's promises made to Abraham, Jesus was also the present-future, the one through whom God's wondrous future came rushing to meet the present day. Another way to say this is simply to proclaim that Jesus ushered in the kingdom of God; i.e. God's wondrous future.

The kingdom arrives

In God’s kingdom, the brokenhearted are healed, captives are set free, those who mourn are comforted – all this is truly Good News to the oppressed. In God’s kingdom, swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:5). The blind see, the deaf hear, and the mute speak (Isaiah 35:5-7). The prophets of the Old Testament spoke long and clearly about the coming of God’s kingdom. In his teachings and actions, Jesus taught and showed people what God’s kingdom is really like. He healed the sick, he made the blind see – all that is wrong with this world will be healed. Jesus hung around with the outcasts of Jewish society to demonstrate that everyone is welcome in the people of God. He showed people that God’s kingdom was not just a promised future but also a present reality. As Jesus says in Matthew 4:17, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Indeed!

But if the kingdom of God was ushered in by Jesus, why is there still sin and death in the world?

Jesus came talking about fulfillment of the Jewish hope and demonstrating the reality of God’s kingdom. In God’s kingdom there are no blind or lame, so Jesus made the blind see and the lame walk. Though most Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, some did. In the years immediately after Jesus’ resurrection, these followers of Jesus, all of whom were Jewish, had a problem. They proclaimed to all who would listen that Jesus truly was the long-expected Messiah, but it was also clear that evil and tragedy and suffering were still present in the world. Using Figure 1 as a guide, it’s as if the Messiah had come, but the Kingdom of God had not! To the average Jew, the answer was simple – Jesus wasn’t really the Messiah, hence the world still awaited the coming of the Kingdom of God.

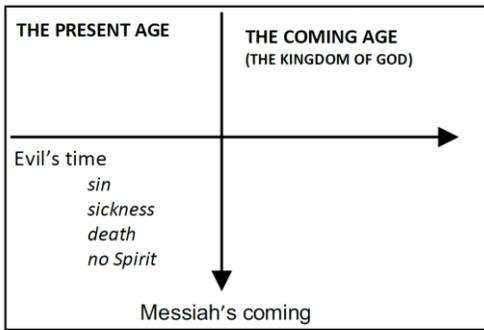


Figure 1. Jewish expectations in Jesus’ day (figures from Fee’s *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*)

Already/Not yet

But Jesus’ disciples had seen, touched, and eaten with the risen Christ. They knew that God’s anointed had indeed come. Thus, the problem was not with Jesus but with the Jewish perspective depicted in Figure 1. In the writings of the New Testament, we see a new perspective emerging, as depicted in Figure 2.

Yes, Jesus was the Messiah. Yes, God’s kingdom had come -- but not yet in all its fullness! The time of renewal had begun with the Messiah’s coming but the consummation of this transformation would await his return. The Christians came to understand that they lived “between times” when God’s kingdom had come already, but not yet. I really can’t overemphasize how

important to our reading of the NT is our understanding of this “already/not yet” perspective. When Paul writes that Christians are the ones on whom the “ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor 10:11), he means exactly that! This framework determined everything about the early Christians – how they lived, how they thought, what they wrote, how they worshipped . . . everything. The new order had begun. They were new creations (2 Cor 5:17). They were now the people of the Spirit. . . . and, truly, so are we!

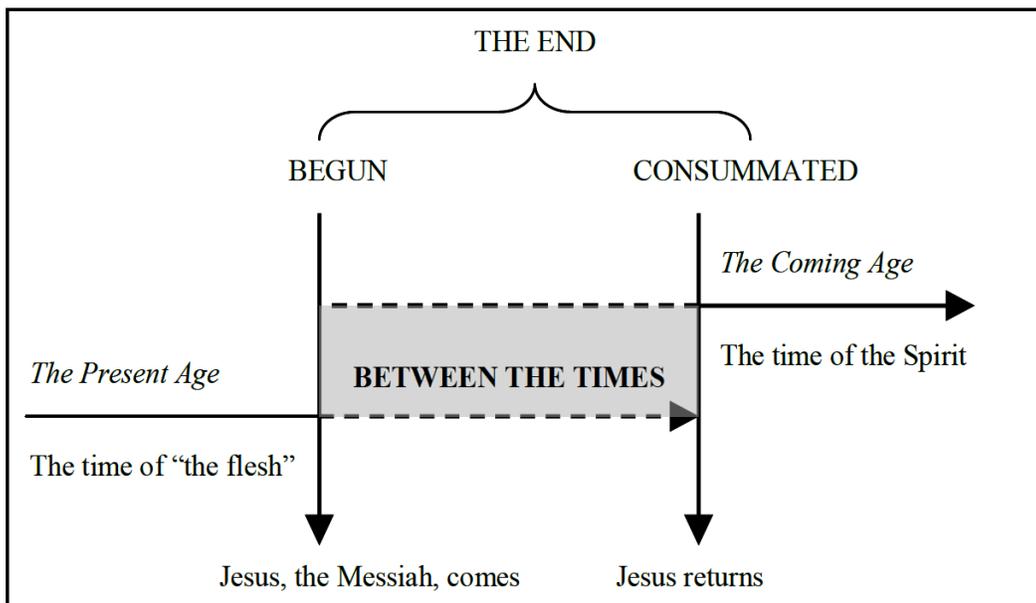


Figure 2. The Christians’ new perspective: already/not yet

As Gordon Fee writes, we are empowered by God's Spirit to live the life of the future, of God's kingdom, in the present age. We are to be, in Paul's phrase, "ambassadors for Christ," carrying God's message of reconciliation and hope to the world, in what we do and say every day. We are new creations not just for our own sakes but for the sake of all the world. Paul understood that in his journeys he was crisscrossing the Mediterranean founding colonies of a new human race, a people born from above, born of the Spirit (John 3). First UMC is just such a colony. It can be hard for us to think of ourselves this way . . . but that is the nature of transformation. It may take the butterfly awhile to comprehend its own rebirth. We may not always feel like new creations. We certainly don't always act like new creations. But we are. This is the real world.

A new day

John and Jesus both proclaimed that a new day was dawning. Jesus showed the Jews a new way of being the people of God so that they might truly be the light to the world. We have the same responsibility to be God's light, to do all we can to build a world in which God's will is done, to bring about the marriage of heaven and earth that we pray for each week.

But in seeking after this divine marriage, we are not on our own. The Holy Spirit, the empowering presence of God, is our "comforter" and "advocate" (John 14:26 & 15:26). The new day is a day of peace and joy. Sadly, too often, we live in a wilderness of our own creation. Yet, Jesus meets us there. In him, we are reborn. We are strengthened and renewed. The world may still be a wilderness filled with temptations to turn away from God, but we are prepared so that, by the power of Christ, we can face life's temptations and trials yet remain true to our Lord, even as we proclaim him to all who will listen.