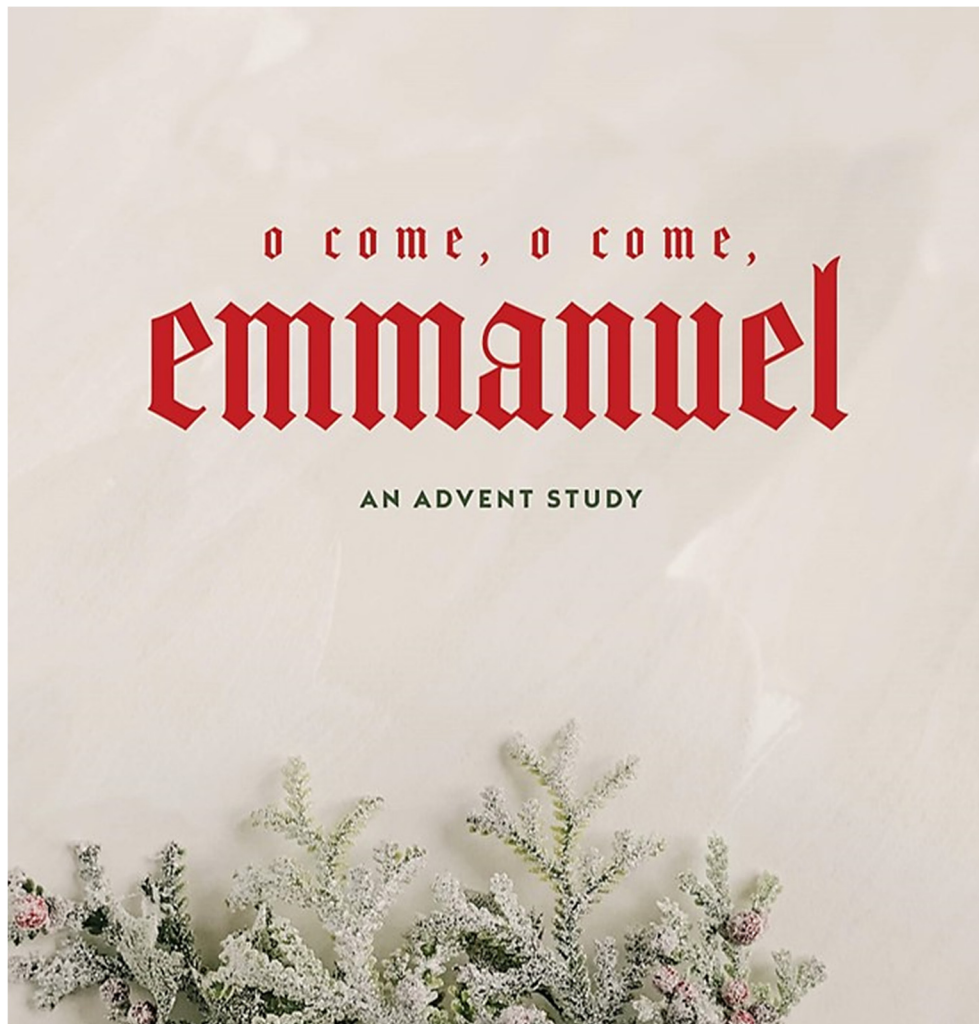


**Dayspring**  
*by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle*



**Prayer of Illumination**

Guide us, O God,  
by your Word and Spirit,  
that in your light we may see light,  
in your truth find wisdom,  
and in your will discover your peace,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

## Background

There once was an old Latin teacher who had an unusual habit. Before every class, he would gravely bow to his students before he taught them each day. One day, a student plucked up the courage to ask the teacher why he did this. "Because you never know what one of these pupils will turn out to be." He had a reverence, respect, and honor for his students. He chose to see the hope, the possibility, the future in them.

In our passage today, Zechariah the old priest is a lot like that old Latin teacher—bowing to his newborn son John the Baptist, seeing the future greatness of his newborn child in that moment, seeing not only the great privilege of raising him, but the supreme responsibility laid before him in the years ahead—that one day this child would become, not only a man, but a prophet of the Most High, a precursor, a forerunner who would direct us to the long-awaited Messiah.

You see, the Christmas story contains two births. Jesus, of course, our Lord, Savior, and Messiah born in Bethlehem, but there is a second birth that's often forgotten. The birth of John the Baptist is a vital part of the story too because he points us to Jesus. He prepares the way to the Messiah.

This Christmas and always, let us love and respect the children entrusted to our care. It is a sacred duty.

We read earlier in the first chapter of Luke that the Priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were righteous and lived blamelessly before the Lord. They also were childless and advanced in years. That particular year, the lot fell on the priest Zechariah to enter the sanctuary to burn incense on behalf of the people. Luke tells us in his gospel everyone was outside praying. When the people of God pray in Luke, things happen. So while the people prayed outside the temple, an angel visited the old priest Zechariah inside the temple.

*"Do not be afraid Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife will bear you a son and you shall name him John. You will have joy and delight and many will rejoice at his birth and he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit and turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. He will make ready for the Lord a people prepared for him."*

Now when the angel appeared to Mary earlier, she immediately rejoiced in the "Magnificat." The first words Mary uttered in her song were: "My soul magnifies the Lord." Not so Zechariah. It took him a little longer to come around. His first words to the angel: "How can I know this? It's impossible. I am old and my wife is advanced in years. My future will be no different than my past." The angel replied: "I am Gabriel. You will be silenced and unable to speak until your wife gives birth."

Well, the "chronologically advanced" Elizabeth did conceive, just as the angel promised. And also for nine months and eight days, old Zechariah was speechless, just as the angel promised. But eight days after John's birth, at the child's circumcision, when boys were named, Zechariah could speak. He had a lot of time to reflect on the angel's words and to listen. What were the first words that crossed his lips after he'd been mute for nearly a year? Complaint? Criticism? Contempt? Cussing? No.

*"Blessed is the Lord. Praise be to the God of Israel because he has visited and redeemed his people."*

Zechariah then confirmed the name of his boy given by Gabriel: *"His name is John,"* which means God's gift or God is gracious. Old Zechariah used his time of silence and solitude well. He was now, by the grace of God, Zechariah 2.0. He tapped into his long-lost inner child of God and found his voice, and his tongue was loosed to praise God for God's goodness and faithfulness to his people. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he spoke this blessing and this prophecy, called the *"Benedictus"* meaning "Praise" or "Blessing" from the Latin translation.

The reborn Zechariah first looked back to the past—thanking God that all the promises from the Hebrew scriptures had come true—going back to Abraham, Moses, and David. Then he recounted and rejoiced in the hundreds of years of God's activity in history—of visiting, saving, redeeming, delivering, and honoring his covenant with his people.

Then the child-like old priest looked forward to the future, personalizing it. His son John, who later would be John the Baptist, would have the honor of not being in the limelight, of not being the center of attention or the center of the universe, but the honor of pointing to the Messiah and proclaiming to the people:

*"Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" I am unworthy to untie the straps of his sandals."*

In other words, God is doing a new thing!

Zechariah got it right this second time. John the Baptist would eventually get it right, and so must we:

It's all about the Messiah, *it's not about me.*

Let the lyrics to our life song be like Zechariah's *Benedictus*—a blessing to God and to others—music to the ears.

*Let's hear now the Word of the Lord from...*

### **Scripture: Luke 1:67-79 (NKJV)**

Now John's father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

"Blessed is the Lord God of Israel,  
for He has visited and redeemed His people,  
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us  
in the house of His servant David,  
as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,  
who have been since the world began,  
that we should be saved from our enemies  
and from the hand of all who hate us,  
to perform the mercy promised to our fathers  
and to remember His holy covenant,  
the oath which He swore to our father Abraham:  
To grant us that we,

being delivered from the hand of our enemies,  
might serve Him without fear,  
in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.

"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;  
for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,  
to give knowledge of salvation to His people  
by the remission of their sins,  
through the tender mercy of our God,  
with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## SERMON – Dayspring

*O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer  
Our spirits by thine advent here  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.*

That verse is based on Luke 1:78-79 that we just read. And they might very well be my two favorite verses in all of Scripture:

*Through the tender mercy of our God,  
whereby the Dayspring from on high has visited us;  
to give light to them who sit in darkness  
and the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

What or who is this dawn, this dayspring from on high, this morning light of heaven breaking upon us and visiting us?

### Jesus

The One to whom John the Baptist leads us. Through the tender mercy of our God, he sent the Messiah to visit us.

### Mercy

That's a good word and a strong word. Jesus tells us in Luke 6 that mercy is the primary motivation behind God's activity.

*"Be ye therefore merciful," says Jesus, "as your Father is also merciful."*

Do you believe in the tender mercy of God to you? To others? To the world?

Mercy is grace in action. The tender mercy of God is an active mercy—it's tough and tender. You can translate it literally, "God has done mercy." Mercy visits us in Christ. The Messiah is not only the word made flesh, he is mercy made flesh.

James, the brother of Jesus, in his letter puts it this way:

*"Mercy triumphs over judgment."*

You see, Jesus, the Dayspring from on high, lightens our darkness in the dawn and dusk of our lives. The Prince of Peace also helps us to be a people of peace, men and women of mercy, who walk out of the darkness and into the light. The exact meaning of the word "dayspring" is debated. It appears to have a double meaning. A dayspring can be the rising of a heavenly body—a star, a sunrise. But the Greek word can also be translated a shoot or sprout, the growing of a plant.

What is Jesus like? The One to whom John will point? He's like the shoot of King David breaking through depths of the soil bringing life, nourishment, hope, and healing to the nations. But he's more than that. He's also like the rising of the Sun breaking through the darkness of death, lighting our path in the ways of peace. The sending of Jesus is for the purpose of deliverance and rescue. Deliverance from our enemies, deliverance from fear, deliverance from ourselves and our old ways. We're released so that we might serve God free from fear, joyfully worshipping in holiness and righteousness, all of our days.

The Dayspring, the rising Sun, the root of David, will get us moving and get us growing. He'll guide our feet in the way of peace. Whether you find yourself in the morning of life or the evening of life, whether you're old, young, or somewhere in between, "The Sun of Righteousness will arise with healing in his wings." the prophet Malachi says.



I'm a big fan of the Danish theologian and philosopher Kierkegaard. I even have a bumper sticker of him on my car. It's official ladies and gentlemen: Your pastor is a nerd! In his book *"Practice in Christianity,"* Kierkegaard asks this question:

Are you an admirer of Christ or an imitator of Christ?

There's a world of difference between "admiration" and "imitation."

The admirer of Christ appreciates Christ, maybe even adores Christ, but from a very safe distance. An admirer keeps him or herself personally detached. The one admired has no claim upon him or her. To merely admire Jesus as the Prince of Peace, you don't need to personally become a person of peace. That's Jesus' job. But I admire him, respect him.

Now, to imitate Christ is a whole different story. To imitate Christ is to follow Christ, to follow in his footsteps. To imitate our Lord in not just his loftiness, but in his lowliness. Not just in his exaltation, but in his humiliation. To imitate Jesus is to identify with his crucifixion and his resurrection.

Kierkegaard reminds us the imitator of Christ aspires to personally be like what is admired. To be changed. To be moved. Even unsettled. To be an imitator of Christ is to walk in the ways of the Prince of Peace. To take on the family likeness. To follow in the footsteps of our elder brother Jesus. We don't just know his teaching in our heads, but we follow the Teacher with our feet, wherever he leads. The imitator strives to be like what he or she admires. In other words, we desire to resemble Christ. And so we cry out to God for help, for a miracle, for a divine breakthrough. And God answers from the heavens with a thundering and merciful YES!!!! Believe and be-live in my Son! He can do in you what you cannot do for yourself.

In Christ's birth, we are born again. We humble ourselves and become like a child—even if you're a keenager like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Abraham and Sarah, or Nicodemus. With Christ in you, you exchange your old life, old ways, and receive a new life, a new way of peace. You imitate the Messiah's sufferings by being humble. In solidarity with the Savior, you choose to be someone who serves others, rather than always demanding to be served.

With the Messiah in you, you take up your cross and die to yourself so that Christ may increase and you decrease, like John the Baptist later said.

Immanuel, I want to be so much more than a Christ Admirer. I want to be a Christ Imitator. I want to be a God-pleaser, not a people-pleaser. I invite you to join me in following him. Would you imitate Christ with me this Advent?

Put your foot into the footprints of Christ with me. It's a track and trail that leads to not only the manger, but to the shores of Galilee, up the mountain to Calvary, out of the empty tomb, and into the world. And then when our earthly journey is done, his footprints in the sky will lead us safely home to heaven. He's been where we are and comes back to us from the future.

Amen.

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