

Sermon Text (Luke 1:5–22 ESV)

⁵ In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

⁸ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” ²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute.

Jesus Comes to Us in Prayer

What makes a theologian? Is it getting a master’s or doctorate degree in theology? Is it getting ordained as a pastor? Is it simply studying the Scriptures and knowing them really well? According to Martin Luther, there are three things that make a theologian: *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*; which is Latin for *prayer*, *meditation*, and *trials* or *temptation*. This evening, we will be looking at the first of these three: *oratio*.

Oratio is more than just prayer. It is talking to God in moments when we know that our reason will not be enough; and it is also talking about God in those same types of moments. As theologians, pastors need to make sure that they are understanding the Word of God so that they may accurately teach what God says in his Word to the people whom God has put under their care.

They also need to turn to God in prayer in moments of hardship, during trials or temptation, instead of relying on their own reason to get them through it; and they need to teach the people under their care to turn to God in prayer in their hardships as well. So, pastors pray to God in these moments for understanding.

But it isn't just pastors who are theologians; all believers are theologians, including you. It isn't just pastors who can pray to God, nor is it just pastors who can read the Word of God and understand it with the help of God. All believers can do these things, and they can do them because of the faith that God has created in their hearts through his Word, faith that believes that Jesus is their Savior from sin. True, you have called pastors to teach you what the Scriptures say, but that doesn't mean that you are incapable of understanding the Scriptures without them. You can follow the example of the Bereans, who "received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things [that Paul and Silas preached to them] were so" (Acts 17:11). So, you can also turn to God and pray to him for understanding when reason is not enough.

Psalm 119 gives a model for what we should pray to God: "Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end. Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it" (Psalm 119:33–35). Phrases like these are repeated throughout the psalm. This is pointed out in the Formula of Concord, saying that "David prayed more than ten times in Psalm 119 alone that God would impart to him the understanding he needed to grasp and learn divine teaching properly" (FC SD II 15).

It is only through the Word that we learn the truth: the truth that we are by nature sinful, the truth that we deserve to spend all eternity in hell because of our sins, the truth that we need a Savior to deliver us from our sins, the truth that our Savior has come in the person of Jesus, and the

truth that we will one day go to heaven because Jesus saved us by his perfect life and innocent death on the cross. We are only able to understand these truths through the Holy Spirit, who comes to us when the Word is preached to us and when we read the Word on our own. Because of the work that the Holy Spirit does in our hearts through the Word, we have the comfort that Jesus has won the forgiveness of sins for us by his death on the cross. Without the Holy Spirit creating faith in our hearts, faith that is able to understand the teachings of Scripture and believe that Jesus has saved us from our sins, everything that the Scriptures say is foolishness. As the apostle Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Now, it makes sense that we should pray to God for understanding if we don’t understand what the Scriptures say, but why do we need to continue to pray to God for understanding? As believers, don’t we already understand what God has revealed to us in his Word? Unfortunately, we don’t always understand the Word of God like we should, even though we are believers. We see an example of how we can act in our reading for today, where we hear of a man named Zechariah.

Zechariah was a priest, and as a priest, he was familiar with what the Scriptures said. In fact, we hear in our reading for today that both Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were “righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord” (verse 6). This meant that they both believed in the promised Messiah, which moved them to follow all of the commands and regulations that God had given to the people of Israel.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had no children because Elizabeth was barren. They both prayed to God for a child, but now, in addition to Elizabeth being barren, they were both advanced in

years, making the possibility of them ever having a child even less likely than it already was. But despite this, God answered their prayers, and he sent the angel Gabriel to Zechariah while he was burning incense in the temple to tell him the good news.

How would you expect someone like Zechariah to respond to this good news? Would you expect him to react like Abraham, who could not help but fall on his face in worship and laugh because he was filled with such joy when God revealed to him that he and his wife, Sarah, would have a son, despite their old age? Surely, Zechariah would react in a similar way. After all, he was a priest, someone who surely understood the miraculous power of God. If he didn't understand it, why would he pray to God for a child in the first place? But how did Zechariah react instead? "Zechariah said to the angel, 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years'" (verse 18).

This was not a case in which we would expect Zechariah to have to pray to God for understanding. The Word of God was being delivered directly to him by a messenger of God. There should have been no reason for him to doubt what Gabriel was telling him, and yet, he did. Despite his belief in God, in this moment, Zechariah was not putting his trust in God; he was relying on his reason, and his reason told him that it was impossible for him and his wife to have a child when they were this advanced in years. Therefore, Zechariah demanded proof from Gabriel that what he was saying was true.

There are plenty of examples of theologians, both pastors and laypeople like you, who fall into the same trap as Zechariah did today. When they read the Scriptures, they see things that don't make sense, and so, they make it make sense. God has given his Church the authority to forgive sins? That doesn't make sense, because only God can forgive sins. Therefore, the Church must just be reminding people that God has forgiven them. God gives us the forgiveness of sins in baptism

and the Lord's Supper? That doesn't make sense, because if we already believe in Jesus, we already have the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, baptism and the Lord's Supper must be only symbolic. God says that if we are saved, it is completely by his grace, but if we are condemned, it is completely our own fault? That doesn't make sense. Therefore, God must either choose who is going to heaven and hell without giving us a say in it at all, or, if we are saved, we must have done something to contribute to our salvation. They expect to be able to use their reason to understand the Word of God, but because they rely on their reason instead of praying to God for understanding, they believe and teach things about the Word of God that are false.

It can be all too easy for us to fall into these same traps. We may be believers, but we also want the Scriptures to make sense to us. We want to be able to understand them with our own reason; to be able to easily explain everything and answer every question that the world can throw at us so that they cannot refute us. But when we do that, who are we putting our trust in? Are we putting our trust in God, or in ourselves? If we are trying to use our reason to understand the Word of God, then we are putting our trust in ourselves.

When we are confronted with our sins and our weaknesses, reason cannot give us comfort. So, what do we do? We turn to God and pray to him for understanding. What does God reveal to us in his Word that can give us comfort? He reveals to us that he sent his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. All of the times that we did not turn to God in prayer for understanding; all the times that we put our trust in our own reason instead of in God were put to death with Jesus on the cross. Because of Jesus, we don't have to fear the consequences of our sins, because he has already faced the consequences of our sins for us. Our sins have been paid by him in full, and because of that, the gates of heaven have been opened to us. Jesus gives us the comfort that reason cannot give. Jesus gives us a lasting comfort.

Zechariah received this same comfort. Because he put his trust in his reason and not in God, he lost the ability to speak until his son, John the Baptist, was born. He knew that he had sinned and was repentant. And when he could speak again, he “was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, ‘Blessed be 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 from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us’” (Luke 1:67–71).

In this season of Advent, we celebrate all the ways in which Jesus comes to us. He came to us in the past as true man, so that he could live a perfect life and die an innocent death on the cross for our sins. He will come again in glory one day to bring us home to heaven for all eternity. And he also comes to us today in the Word and Sacraments. One way that he does this is when we turn to him in prayer so that he can help us understand his Word. Thanks to the understanding that he gives to us, we know all that he has done for us and all that he still does for us. We do not put our trust in our reason, but as theologians, we put our trust in God and turn to him in prayer, asking him to help us understand his Word. For it is only through him that we have understanding, just as it is only through him that we are saved.