

# SoulSpace

SERIES: ADVENT HEROES

Season colour: **VIOLET**

In this new series, **Gerard Moloney CSsR** looks at some of the significant characters of Advent.

It's easy for many of us to identify with the Lincoln family in their sadness and tears. We lose someone close to us; a relationship breaks up, chronic pain ensnares us; financial woes strangle us, loneliness envelopes us; work – or its lack – crushes us; the future seems like deep mid-winter, dark, dank, dreary.

Politically our world seems like it's convulsed and divided, uncertain and fearful, unstable and insecure, with chilling echos of the 1930s.

Church-wise, in the West, it can feel the same. Convents closing; churches emptying, vocations collapsing, the greying and balding of those in ministry. A bleak mid-winter with few signs of spring, despite Pope Francis's best efforts.

During the next four Sundays, we will reflect on some of the notable characters of Advent. A characteristic they shared was trust and hope in God. Even when they felt lost, confused, uncertain, they trusted in God. Like the Lincoln family, they didn't give up.

Today we focus on Zechariah, husband of Elizabeth and father of John the Baptist. We don't know a lot about him. He features only in Luke's infancy narrative. We are told he was a priest serving in the Temple and that he and Elizabeth were good people, worthy in God's sight. They scrupulously kept God's law.

Yet, they had no children. For Jews back then, childlessness was a scandal. It meant God hadn't favoured them. It raised question marks about them. We are told they felt humiliated. They were also getting well on in years, and it looked like this shame would never leave them.

Zechariah must have felt profound disappointment, even despair. You can imagine what his colleagues would have been saying. God hadn't blessed them. God had let them down. They must have wondered why.

Still, Zechariah did his duty. He continued to serve in the Temple. At his age, he must have felt his future was behind him. He had abandoned hope of being a father.

No wonder he was incredulous when the angel

appeared to him in the Temple's inner sanctum to tell him Elizabeth was about to conceive and become a mum. That he would be a dad, after all, to a child he must name John. He couldn't believe it. He questioned it. How could this be?

His incredulity led him to be dumbstruck literally. He lost the power of speech; God muted him until God's plan would be fulfilled. Literally and metaphorically, Zechariah was speechless.

After John's birth, when Zechariah announced his child would be named John, he got his voice back, and he praised God in a beautiful song we call the Benedictus: "Blessed be the Lord, for he has visited his people, to redeem them, to set them free." Zechariah's sadness had turned to joy, his despair to hope, his disappointment to glorious delight. God had blessed him and Elizabeth.

## THREE LESSONS

**T**hree short lessons we can learn from the story of Zechariah.

First is his fidelity to God. He kept going. He kept serving God. Even when all seemed bleak, he didn't give up. He remained faithful, even though it seemed his prayers would be unanswered. So it must be with us, no matter how challenging the circumstances, we must trust in God. We must never give up.

Second, disappointment is okay. Failure is okay. Zechariah experienced disappointment, but he persevered. He did his best. He continued to do his best. The same must apply to us.

Third, never lose hope. Zechariah was surprised by joy, blessed in a most unexpected and wonderful way. Always be ready to be surprised by joy. Hope is the message of the Advent season. Hope is what the story of Zechariah teaches us (what the Lincoln story teaches us). Never lose hope – for God is with us always. ■



## Today's readings

**Jer 33:14-16**  
**1 Tess 3:12-4:2**  
**Lk 21:25-28.34-36**

## GOD'S WORD TODAY

Today's Gospel is part of a teaching Jesus gave to his disciples in the Temple of Jerusalem. Although Jesus doesn't give any timetable for the 'end of the ages,' he does tell us how we should act in the meantime. It's easy to fall into the trap of keeping up with the times, of buying into its false value system. Advent invites us to be self-critical. It invites us to become aware of how our hearts, despite our best intentions, can get coarsened as though the good times will go on forever and there will be no moment of reckoning.



## Zechariah continued to serve God even when it seemed that God wouldn't answer his prayer.

**T**he location was desolate, a nondescript headstone in a tiny graveyard in a densely wooded area in Southern Indiana. It belongs to a woman obscure throughout her life and for years afterwards – Mrs Lincoln's grave. Nancy Hanks Lincoln died in October 1818, aged 44. Her oldest son, Abraham, age 9, would now have to help care for the household, become a man while still a boy. Nancy would never know what her son would become, the indelible mark he would make on history. She died without that knowledge, laid to rest in a tiny grave near a tiny log cabin. I can't begin to imagine how despairing she felt at the end of her hard life – leaving behind her husband Thomas and young children.

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