****

**Sunday 12 December 2021 to Sunday 19 December 2021**

****

Sunday 12 December 2021

# A preposition

by Pastor Reid Matthias

**He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16b).**

Read Luke 3:7–18

In terms of grammar, we don’t take much notice of prepositions. Often, we fixate on nouns and verbs and the occasional adjective or adverb, but prepositions seem like poor, neglected cousins.

Here is an example of how prepositions can make such a huge difference.

Dave threw the ball to Tina.

Dave threw the ball at Tina.

Both sentences are directional. The ball is going towards Tina with intention. But in the first, it seems like they are playing catch. In the second, they are playing dodgeball.

Prepositions make a big impact.

Notice in our Scripture verse the intention of the preposition.

Now, why does the preposition ‘with’ make such a difference? In many translations, it reads, ‘baptise you in the Holy Spirit and fire’. Which sounds better to you? As we move towards Christmas, towards the time of year when our spiritual hopes are piqued, would you prefer to be splashed or immersed?

To be baptised with the Spirit and fire comes across as something that happens to the outside – a nice blanket of comfy Spirit and cozy warmth that the gentle Holy Spirit brings to us. The splashing baptism with the Spirit and fire feels somewhat ‘safe’ or that somehow this baptism is a vaccination against fear.

Yet, to be baptised in the Spirit and in fire, there is no escape. This is an immersion into the power of a holy and utterly separate, powerful God who brings you into communion with him and the Spirit, always pointing to the Messiah. The Spirit surges through the body of Christ, bringing life and power through the Incarnated Promise – Jesus.

When John speaks to the groups, he wants them to be in people, not merely with people. He wants them to experience the power and the all-consuming burning hope of the Father, as the Messiah comes so that when the Spirit and fire have purified us, all that is left is a glorious joy in Jesus.

I hope you can think about your prepositions this Advent.

**Holy Spirit, as the lights of Christmas around us remind us of Jesus, let the power of the Holy Spirit illuminate a future in him. Amen.**

Monday 13 December 2021

# The God for all people

by Pastor Reid Matthias

**These I will bring them to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer (Isaiah 56:7a).**

[Read Isaiah 56:1–8](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+56%3A1%E2%80%938&version=NRSV)

I remember my first footsteps onto Australian soil when I emigrated almost 11 years ago. We had flown from Chicago, the third-largest city in the United States, to Australia in the middle of February. When we left, it was -20 degrees. When we arrived in Brisbane, it was almost 40.

Not surprisingly, my biggest worry was not the weather but whether I would be accepted or not. It is quite an overwhelming thing to be an outsider, foreigner, stranger to customs. To not know the slang or the subtle gestures of Australians sometimes filled me with fear, and yet I spoke English (but not Australian), I knew farming (but not the Lockyer Valley), and I knew people (but not necessarily Australians).

I try to imagine what it’s like for a non-English-speaking person emigrating to Australia who doesn’t know anything about the country except that it is a beautiful place of refuge and care. I imagine they hope they can fit in just as I did.

For the people of Israel, the issue of who was accepted for refuge and care was a big thing. People to avoid (as much as possible) were outsiders and, in this text, the eunuch – people who wanted to fit in yet were marked for exclusion. Still, in God’s promise to Israel in chapter 56, it is for all people, regardless of nationality, status or any other exclusionary walls that we put up.

When anyone encounters the beauty of the Sabbath, the precision and hope of the commandments and the joy we have in the Lord of all creation, they have a rightful stake and place in the house of God.

As Advent rolls on, are there people you know who have found it difficult to find joy in God’s house of prayer? Are there walls that can be torn down so that all people might see the Saviour of the world?

**Heavenly Father, thank you for your promise to all people. Thank you for helping me find refuge and care in your house of prayer. Amen.**

Tuesday 14 December 2021

# What’s in a name?

by Pastor Reid Matthias

**You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow (Isaiah 62:2b).**

Read Isaiah 62:1–5

Families usually give nicknames as a term of endearment. Receiving a well-intentioned nickname is a sign of acceptance and love. Some great Australian athletes have had wonderful nicknames: Greg Norman (The Great White Shark) or Ian Thorpe (The Thorpedo). For the less famous, Australians have a delightfully quirky sense of humour for shortening names or adding ‘o’ or ‘ie’ to the end. Garry, Darren, Sharon – Gazza, Dazza and Shazza; Warne – Warnie, Clark – Clarko; Field – Fieldie. It seems like everyone who belongs to the heart of someone else has another name.

So it was with the people of Israel when God wanted to show his immense favour to them. He gave them names as they journeyed out from exile. In this vindication, God promised that his rescue would shine out to the world like a blazing new dawn. And the names he gave them would be ‘The Lord Takes Delight’ and ‘Married’ instead of ‘Deserted’ and ‘Desolate’.

Imagine the Israelite’s joy as they left exile after decades of hearing their new names: Hephzibah and Beulah. (Hephzibah means ‘My Delight is in Her’, and Beulah means ‘Married’.) For those of named Hephzibah or Beulah, this is your Bible verse. Rejoice!

But we are all given a name by God, which encapsulates who we are and whose we will always be: Blessed Child. Even before our baptism, God sees the person he created in their innermost being. God sees a blessed child he made for a purpose and with whom he desires to have a unified relationship. He calls us each by name to himself.

As we continue our path through Advent, waiting for Christ’s return, we know that the one named Immanuel shall be with us. God is with us in Jesus.

I pray that you hear his voice speaking your name.

**Father in heaven, thank you for loving me and naming me as your own. Thank you for the gift of inclusion and acceptance in your kingdom. Amen.**

Wednesday 15 December 2021

# Tree shade

by Pastor Reid Matthias

**People will dwell again in his shade; they will flourish like the grain (Hosea 14:7).**

Read Hosea 14:5–9

When I was young, my family went Christmas tree hunting at the end of November. It was an annual rite of passage. We would journey to a tree farm where we would walk down the endless rows and choose one – the special tree that would seemingly call out to us. After we had attached it to the roof of our car to take it home, we stopped inside the shop to have hot apple cider and connect with other tree hunters.

When we set up the tree at home, we spent hours decorating it. Mementos of the past – small things we kids had made, tiny photos embedded in cutesy ornaments – hung from the boughs with care. Christmas lights weaved in and out of the pine needles, blinking brightly in the darkening night.

It was indeed the most wonderful time of the year.

For pleasure, I would sometimes scooch under the tree face up to stare through the greenery and the beautiful ghostly lights that illuminated an entirely different world. I found that in that place, I could rest.

In the text today, Hosea describes a tree that gives both shade and rest. Whether the cedar of Lebanon or the olive tree, the people could dwell in its shade and then flourish.

Have you come to a place in your life where you would like to lie in the shade of a tree, stare up through the branches into that mysterious place and contemplate the goodness of God? Would this tree be like the cedar or olive? How do you think God would have decorated a cedar of Lebanon or an olive tree?

I think there would be memories of the wilderness experience, perhaps symbols of fire and cloud. Maybe an ark and commandments. Perhaps on this tree where the Israelites flourished was a prophetic symbol for their Messiah.

In the shade of the cedar or olive tree, the chosen people of God could hear and sense again that sin and death would soon be finished.

I don’t think that’s changed today.

**Jesus Christ, guide me to the place of flourishing. Guide me to a place where I can experience your love and mercy every day. Amen.**

Thursday 16 December 2021

# By force or by grace?

by Pastor Reid Matthias

**The kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence and violent people have been raiding it (Matthew 11:12b).**

Read Matthew 11:11–15

I stare incredulously at the news.

Every day, serious broadcasters stare with sombre eyes towards a teleprompter reminding us that the world is not a safe place. Around every corner, danger sneaks into the night like a thief, waiting to steal our most prized possessions: our wealth, health, time and reputations. Thus, we isolate ourselves behind closed doors to avoid the violence that the broadcasters so quickly warn us about.

Contemporary culture is fuelled by pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony and sloth. This endless machine of sin promotes violence against the very things of God. In our context, we tend to think this violence is the media attacking Christian worship services or Christian freedoms. No, I believe this violence against the kingdom of heaven has more to do with what Jesus considers important – the foils of those seven deadly sins: faith, hope and love.

Today, we are still distracted by the powerful. Jesus wanted people to understand the Messiah would be about the blind receiving sight, the unhearing receiving the sound of music. Those paralysed can now move, those cast out are now included, and those who were dead can live again. And most blessedly, the poor (not just financially) can receive the greatest news of all (Matthew 11:4,5).

That the Messiah, Jesus Christ, had come to deliver them from the power and violence aimed against the kingdom of heaven was the greatest gift of all.

John the Baptist railed against the violence of the unjust against the kingdom of heaven. He was the prophet who pointed all people to Jesus, even those who would commit violence against him. Now John, the last of the prophets, points us towards Jesus. His words capture our imagination.

Jesus Christ has come, and though the world seeks violence against faith, hope and love, he has already won the war.

I pray that you will encounter the one John the Baptist pointed to, Jesus, the Messiah.

**Holy Jesus, protect me from the violence of the world and help me be brave in standing up for those who need to see you. Amen.**

Friday 17 December 2021

# Being sure

by Pastor Reid Matthias

**Zechariah asked the angel, ‘How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years’ (Luke 1:18).**

Read Luke 1:5–25

Ironically, most people like to be sure of the landing before the leap of faith. We talk big, I think. We say things like, ‘Whatever the plans God has for me, I’ll be fine as long as Jesus walks beside me’. In this visual, we think of the Footprints poem, that somewhere along the way, we’ll have the strength to let Jesus carry us.

Yeah, right.

It’s very hard to relinquish our sight for God’s vision. We like to see where we’re going. We prefer to stay informed of every step of the process and be invited into a discussion with God about what we think is best for us.

In this, Zechariah seems to display the very things that we feel. When the angel approaches Zechariah in the temple and tells him Elizabeth will have a child (a very important one), his response is unsure.

To be honest, I feel for Zechariah and Elizabeth. Who knows how long they’d been trying to have a family. Certainly, Elizabeth’s exclamation that their ‘disgrace had been taken away among the people’ (verse 25) is a clue of what they’d been praying for. But Zechariah’s need for surety was protection against disappointment. Just like the people of Israel, they’d been waiting a long time for change.

As I read this beginning narrative in Luke’s Gospel, it seems patently unfair that Zechariah is ‘punished’ for his disbelief. And yet, his inability to speak is a small price to pay for God’s promise coming to fruition.

It’s pointless to wonder what would have happened if Zechariah had trusted in the first place. What we do gain from Zechariah and Elizabeth’s story is that faith in Jesus is rarely about being sure of the steps ahead, only being sure that those steps lead forward to the kingdom of God.

**God, the creator and sustainer of all life, plan and guard my steps into the future. Help me trust you despite an uncontrollable sense of worry about what the future holds. Thank you for walking with me. Amen.**

Saturday 18 December 2021

# A bowl full of tears

by Pastor Reid Matthias

**You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful (Psalm 80:5).**

Read Psalm 80:1–7

Psalm 80 is definitely an honest prayer. It’s not one we usually hear when prayers are generally a litany of tasks for God to accomplish before he goes to sleep at night. In our current pandemic climate, we often pray for safety, protection and an end to all things to do with viruses, hand sanitiser and face masks. What else is on the tip of your prayer consciousness?

The honest question, though, is this: how long, Lord God Almighty, will your anger smoulder against the prayers of your people (verse 4)?

Is God angry with humanity? Is he so upset that he has put his fingers in his ears and stopped them up from hearing our prayers? Because of God’s righteousness, does he feed us on tears and quench our thirst with saline pain?

Honestly, I don’t know.

But I wonder if there isn’t something to be learned by a diet of tears. When we are beset and surrounded by sorrow, we are often brought back to the feet of God to ask for salvation. Bring about your power, Holy Spirit. Shine your face on us, Father in heaven. Restore us to life, Prince of Peace and Lord of Lords.

The only power of salvation in the world is from the author of the word. In Christ alone, we might be nursed back to health by the tears of today. Perhaps in finishing the crust and emptying the bowl, we might be reminded of our beautiful need for the Saviour.

Wherever you are today, whatever your situation is at this moment in time, pause for a little while and read Psalm 80:1–7. Stop and read it three or four times, and then pray verse seven.

**Restore us, God Almighty, make your face shine us, that we may be saved. Amen.**

Sunday 19 December 2021

# A meeting filled with wonder

by Rachael Stelzer

**And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant’ (Luke 1:46–48).**

Read Luke 1:39–45 [46–55]

Mary has been visited by an angel, who has shared that she will be the mother of God’s son. After inquiring how this could be, Mary has humbly accepted the role given to her, with all of the scandal and social shame this carries. But who can she talk to? Who will understand the crazy rollercoaster she is on?

And the angel provided the answer: Mary’s own older relative, Elizabeth, who is in her sixth month of pregnancy and herself in isolation. So Mary visits the hill country of Judea to find some support for this journey.

As Elizabeth opens the door to Mary, the baby in her womb leaps. The angel had promised Zechariah that John the Baptist would be filled with the Holy Spirit, and this prophecy is already borne out before his birth. And Elizabeth, too, is filled with the Spirit, and she begins to loudly proclaim what she cannot yet see – that Mary is pregnant with the Messiah. In contrast to most in their society, who would see this birth as a scandal and a punishment, Elizabeth proclaims Mary blessed.

Can you imagine the two clasping hands, the older woman jumping for joy and shouting her excitement to the teenager in front of her? Can you see Mary, relief flooding from her as the secret she has carried is joyfully prophesied to her by a member of her own family? Do you picture the glimmer of wonder in the eyes of these two women, separated by years – but connected by the miracles occurring in their bodies – and their gratitude for being part of this divine plan?

And Mary’s words are in the form of poetry, a song of joy and praise, in a series of reversals that ring familiar as we remember Jesus’ teaching throughout the Gospels. God has lifted up the lowly but humbled the rich and important. He has filled the hungry with good things but sent the rich away empty. But for Mary, these events are in the past tense. God has already accomplished these things. And she praises God for bringing them about, individually and for the Israelite people.

Like Mary, we look back to God’s power at work, to the reversals that God’s kingdom has ushered in. And like Mary, we look forward to the completion of this work. We look forward to the end of oppression, the lifting up of the lowly, and the restoration of our relationship with God, which came about through Jesus' death and resurrection. This Advent season, may our souls and voices lift with Elizabeth’s and Mary’s as we magnify our great God.

**King Jesus, it is so like you to choose a humble teenager to nurture you as you grew here on earth. We now magnify you as the loving King and Lord of all, and we look forward to your coming again to bring all things to completion. Amen.**