

The Songs of Christmas- Zechariah
Luke 1: 57-79
December 10, 2023 West Valley Presbyterian Church



Last week we reflected on the first of the four songs in the book of Luke: the song of Mary. We learned from Mary that Christmas is about change. Jesus' entry into the world as a human being changed the world, and is still changing it. So if change is happening in our own lives, we can reflect on whether the change we are going through is God driven. And if it is, we can respond with gratitude.

Today is the second Sunday in Advent, so we are going to look at the second song in Luke's gospel: the song of Zechariah. Since he's not as well known as Mary, let me tell you a little about him. He was one of the many priests who served in the Jerusalem temple by rotation- a week or two every year. So in other words, a low level priest who wasn't rich or important. But he was faithful and obedient to God. He was the husband of Elizabeth, whom we heard about last week. Both of them were old, by the standards of the time; and they had no children.

While Zechariah was offering incense in the temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that he and Elizabeth were going to have a son, that he should name his son John, and that John would be great in the sight of the Lord. Zechariah asked Gabriel for proof that what he said was true. Gabriel says, "Because you didn't believe my words, you won't be able to speak your own words until everything I've told you has come true." Sure enough. Zechariah could not speak; he went home to Elizabeth; and she got pregnant.

Our passage for today is about what happens when John is born. Hear now the word of God from the gospel of Luke, chapter 1, vv 57-79.

⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”

⁶¹ They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸ “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn^[a] of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David

⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

⁷¹ salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us —

⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear

⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,

⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

Here ends the reading of God’s holy word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

“Because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.” The path of peace – doesn’t that sound like a blessing? How many years have we been

praying for peace? And yet it seems like there is conflict everywhere, both large scale and small scale. Ukraine has been fighting the most recent Russian invasion for almost two years now, and hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians have died. Israel has been fighting Hamas since October, when Hamas attacked Israel; the total number of deaths so far hasn't yet been established. There is war in Myanmar, in Niger, in Burkina Faso, in Mali, in Sudan, and in Ethiopia. There are smaller armed conflicts going on in dozens of other countries, including Haiti and Mexico.

Even within our own country – we are not physically at war with one another, like we were during the Civil War; but we're not getting along with our fellow citizens as well as we did twenty years ago. Members of one political party don't talk with members of another political party. Family members who wore masks during the pandemic don't talk with other family members who didn't wear masks. Citizens in rural areas and citizens in urban areas have very different points of view and feel that they have very little in common with one another. Am I the only one who feels like it's getting harder and harder to set aside differences and work together on common problems? Which only seem to get more difficult to solve? I think we are all longing for some good news right about now. Yes?

Fortunately, the good news that Zechariah spoke so long ago, is still good news today. He'd had plenty of time to reflect on what he wanted to say – at least nine months! Mary and Elizabeth gain loud voices when the Holy Spirit worked within them and gave them words to speak. Zechariah regains his voice when he obeys Gabriel and confirms that his son's name is John. And then he too is filled with the Holy Spirit, and he prophesies, not only to the neighbors at that time and place, but also to all people in all times and places. So let's take a look at Zechariah's prophecy.

Part 1 of Zechariah's song:

Praising God for fulfilling his promises to his people.

Redemption has begun!

It's in two parts, with the first part praising God because the promises he has made to his people are now being fulfilled. He starts out by saying, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them." Well, the redemption hadn't been completely fulfilled at that point; Jesus hasn't yet been born, let alone has he died for the sins of the world and been raised from the dead. But he has been conceived. He is on earth – growing inside Mary, in fact. Redemption has begun and there is no turning back. Praise be to God!

What does redemption mean for a people who are downtrodden and comparatively few in number? For the people of Judea at the time, it means rescue as a whole nation from enemies. And so Zechariah addresses that. He mentions first a horn of salvation, which means a strong king descended from the King David who had ruled a thousand years earlier. So, a powerful and strong Savior. Zechariah also refers back to the oath that God swore to Abraham, which was, "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after

you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.” So, this powerful Savior will be faithful, and will make it possible for his people to serve him faithfully and without fear, for as long as people live on this earth.

How does that sound to you? Militaristic? We have to remember that at that point in history, Judeans had returned from exile about 500 years prior. They had lived as vassals to one overlord or another for almost that entire time: the Persians, the Seleucids, and then the Romans. Their one period of home rule (the Maccabees) was brief. So, when Zechariah says that God is right now “rescu(ing) us from the hand of our enemies, and enabl(ing) us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days,” that would have sounded like the best news ever to the people of Zechariah’s village. They would have wanted to hear more!

Part 2 of Zechariah’s song:

Explaining how God will fulfill his promises.

Why? To guide our feet into the path of peace.

So Zechariah continued, explaining how this would happen. John, his son, would be the prophet announcing what God was doing in their midst. He would prepare the people to receive the salvation that the Messiah would bring. And how would John do that? By telling his people what they most needed to know: about salvation; about how sins can be forgiven through the mercy of God; and, that it’s the tender mercy of God that brings us Jesus. Jesus was then, and is now, the rising sun who comes to us from heaven. Jesus shines on all those living in darkness and in the shadow of death – namely, us! And why does he do that? To guide our feet into the path of peace.

Which brings us back to the path of peace – the peace we long for, the peace which seems so hard to find. We’ve heard how to get to the path of peace; it’s by letting the light of Jesus guide us to it. But we don’t see a literal light directing us to a specific path of peace; so how do we get there? Zechariah tells us that too. We need to accept the forgiveness of our sins.

And how do we do that? Well, that is something that God helps us with. So let’s pray about it. // Close your eyes. Think back over the course of the day so far. When have you felt irritated or cranky? What were you doing at the time? Maybe you were in a hurry. Maybe you couldn’t find your wallet or your other sock. // Did you snap at the people around you, or say something you knew you shouldn’t have?

Now. Let the light of Jesus illumine every crack and crevice in your soul, and let the mercy of Jesus wash away any sinful thought or word. // Know that you are forgiven, and be at peace.

Accepting Jesus' forgiveness brings peace. Peace within you that spreads out through you, and leads you to reconcile with others. The mercy of God is shining in you and through you right now, and you can help others also to find the path of peace.

It's a good idea to confess our sins regularly, the same way we did just now, because being filled with the mercy and forgiveness of God is a wonderful thing. Confession before God is not about beating ourselves up. It's about allowing Jesus to shine into any darkness within us, and re-setting our feet on the path of peace.

Peace starts with confession; but it doesn't stop there. Remember Jesus telling us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you, back in Matthew 5 in the Sermon on the Mount? If Jesus is shining into the darkness within us, then he will make it possible – or at least easier – to do that. To love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. That's hard; but Jesus can make it possible. He can help us forgive one another as God has forgiven us.

And if we truly can pray for the well-being of those we disagree with; if we truly can forgive those who have harmed us; then we will indeed be walking on the path of peace.

What if every one of us did that? Then our church would be so full of peace that it would radiate right out of our walls and into the community. We'd be changing the social climate towards peace. If we don't like seeing enmity among our fellow citizens, we can do something about that. We can pray for them. We can let the light of Jesus that shines on us, also shine through us, to show forth the path of peace. If we don't like seeing widespread warfare and cruelty, we can do something about it. We can pray that the wars of the world would end. Our prayers are not in vain. Redemption has begun and there is no turning back. Praise be to God!

Let's pray.

Almighty God, you who created everything, including us, we pray that your peace would prevail within us, and among us, and throughout the whole world. Come quickly to save us, so that wars and violence will end, and we will live in peace as you have promised. We know that redemption has begun, and there is no turning back. So we ask that you would keep our words and actions blameless, keep our hearts watchful in holiness, and bring to perfection the good you have begun in us. We ask this through him whose return is certain, whose day draws near: your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Benediction

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit is with you now, and will be with you always. Amen.¹