

Christmas 2018

*“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior”
(Luke 1:46–47 ESV)*

*“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”
(Luke 1:68–69 ESV)*

*“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”
(Luke 2:14 ESV)*

The God Who Keeps His Promises

December 23rd, 2018

Luke 1:67-80

Assistant Pastor Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning church! It is good to be together, amen? Please open your Bibles to Luke 1:67-80. That's on page ??? in your pew Bibles.

As you turn there now, allow me to set the stage for today's story. Earlier in chapter 1 we were introduced to the priest Zechariah. One day, he was offering incense in the temple when, lo and behold, an angel of the Lord appeared! Naturally, he was terrified!

The angel calmed his fears and then gave him some incredible news: Zechariah's wife Elizabeth would bear a son! This special boy will be set apart for God and he will be used to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of the Lord!

Zechariah responded to this amazing news in as perhaps you or I would respond – he began to list off all of the reasons why this simply couldn't work. “How can I believe you?” He asked. “Have you seen how old I am? Let alone my wife?” At which point, the angel provided this amazing response:

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.” (Luke 1:19-20 ESV)

“Do you have any idea who I am or who I work for?” Then Gabriel did something that is absolutely brilliant – he silenced Zechariah and left this priest to meditate on the Scriptures for nine months. I love this! It’s as if Gabriel said: “I want you to take the next nine months and remember all of those sermons you preached in the temple. Remember all of those prophecies that you’ve read.”

So that’s what he did. He prayed and reflected for nine silent months, after which his wife Elizabeth gave birth to a son. They named the boy John; Zechariah’s tongue was loosed and BOOM! He picked up his baby boy and nine-months’ worth of reflection and worship came pouring out of his mouth! That’s what we have in front of us today.

Look with me now at Luke 1:67-80. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, living and active word to us:

⁶⁷ And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has visited and redeemed his people

⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;

⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us

⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,

⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

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

⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high

⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. (Luke 1:67-80 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Zechariah has spent nine months considering the words of Gabriel. Nine months meditating on the prophecies of the Old Testament. Nine months connecting the dots with the coming of his son John who will prepare the way for the Messiah. In the births of these two baby boys, Zechariah sees something that has caused him to explode in praise. So, I think the appropriate response for us this morning is to ask one very important question:

What Did Zechariah See?

I want to explode in praise! I want a heart that overflows with Spirit-filled, scripture saturated worship! I want to celebrate with Zechariah! But if I'm going to do that, I need to see what he saw. So, what did he see?

In order to answer that question, we need to take a moment to consider just who Zechariah was, and what kind of world he was living in. Zechariah was a priest in the division of Abijah. His ancestors had originally served in the temple built by Solomon. Solomon's temple was glorious! It was a marvel, and it served to remind the Israelites that the God of the universe was with them. He was their God and that they were His people.

But in 586 BC that temple was destroyed by the Babylonians and the best and brightest of the Israelites were carried away as slaves.

Nearly 50 years passed before the Israelites were allowed to rebuild. Now, you would think that the reconstruction of the temple would have been met with unanimous joy! But we read:

But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, (Ezra 3:12 ESV)

This might seem like an odd response, but these men had seen Solomon's temple! They knew what had been lost. With one look at the foundations of this second temple they knew that it would pale in comparison with the first. And it did.

And so, the Israelites went on worshipping in the new, lacklustre temple. And, with each passing year, their hope faded. The nations around them grew stronger and any idea of a future political power like that of King David's all but disappeared. To make matters worse, there was a period of 400 years where it seemed as if God had ceased speaking to His people entirely.

It was in this context that Zechariah served as a priest. I want you to try to put yourself in Zechariah's shoes for a moment now. Can you imagine how pessimistic the people must have been? Can you imagine how difficult it must have been for the priests to stand before the people week after week, year after year, to proclaim the coming of the Messiah?

The Israelites were growing disillusioned. Had God forgotten His people? Had He forgotten His promises?

Perhaps Zechariah was growing disillusioned himself. Perhaps that's why he responded to Gabriel's proclamation with disbelief.

I wonder if there are any disillusioned brothers or sisters here today. Maybe you're feeling so downtrodden by the world that you're losing faith that God will ever make it right.

But what we find in today's text is that something has changed! Zechariah is filled afresh with hope and glory! Suddenly all of the prophecies of the Old Testament are flooding into Zechariah's mind and he, with the help of the Spirit, is witnessing the unfolding of God's plan.

Look with me now, and let's try to see what Zechariah saw. First, he saw:

1. Our victory

Filled with the Spirit, Zechariah cried out:

⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us; (Luke 1:68-71 ESV)

Isn't that amazing! Now, look closely at verse 70. Isn't it interesting that Zechariah doesn't say: "the *mouths*" of the holy prophets? He presents the prophets as speaking with one mouth. He spoke this way because he understood a very important truth: Every prophecy in the Bible – every story, Old Testament and New – is unfolding the ONE great story of redemption. We can trace the beginning of the story back to the book of Genesis. There we find the theme that will run all throughout Scripture. It goes something like this:

We were made *by* God to *enjoy* God and to *glorify* Him forever
Our enemy deceived us, and we subsequently ruined everything with our sin and rebellion
God promised that a child would come who would conquer our enemy and set everything right

That story found in Genesis chapters 1-3 sets the stage for all of world history. We live in a broken world, and we're the ones who broke it. There is an enemy seeking to destroy us. But God is still on His throne. He loves us, and He is going to save us.

And Zechariah is looking at these baby boys and seeing very clearly that our victory has arrived.

Here's some application: Next time you look at a nativity scene, let it bring to mind the image of David standing victoriously over Goliath with the slain giant's sword lifted over his head. Because that's what Zechariah was seeing.

Of course our enemy is not Goliath. Zechariah's enemy wasn't Rome. Our enemy has always been from the very beginning that Serpent in the garden. That devil who prowls about like a lion looking to steal and destroy. The deceiver and the accuser. He is our enemy.

But his reign is coming to an end. The Christ-child came and he knocked the teeth out of the lion's mouth. He pulled the sword out of our enemy's hand.

Now, we don't often think this way – we're not inclined to think about spiritual things. But we do have an enemy, and he strikes at us with a powerful weapon – the fear of death. And unfortunately, I believe he wields that weapon liberally at this time of year.

It is a tragic reality that Christmas – a time that ought to be full of joy and wonder – is in reality often a time of very real sorrow. All of the sights, sounds and smells remind us of loved ones who are no longer with us. They remind us that we have an enemy.

But church, my hope for you this Christmas is that, even in the midst of grief, you will be able to rejoice with Zechariah that this enemy's reign is coming to an end. The King has come! He is the fulfilment of every prophecy and promise of the Old Testament, including this one:

He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken. (Isaiah 25:8 ESV)

Amen!

The second thing Zechariah sees in the coming of Christ is:

2. Our restoration

Let's remember back to the beginning of the human story. We were in the garden, living in perfect peace with the God who made us. But the enemy deceived us, and we were willfully deceived. We sinned and it's like we inserted a virus into the system. Suddenly peace gave way to chaos and light gave way to darkness.

But Zechariah sees here that God's plan is still in motion. Listen to this beautiful imagery:

⁷⁸because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:78-79 ESV)

Isn't that incredible?

The sunrise has visited us from on high. How beautiful is that?

We were wandering in darkness – by the way, isn't that a perfect summary of our lives without Jesus? We were groping through life, trying to make sense of it all. We were trying to decide right and wrong for ourselves and all the while we were hurting ourselves and hurting all of the people around us. We were lost in darkness.

But then Jesus came to us. Like the sunrise breaking through the night, the God of the universe entered into our darkness and the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone. (Isaiah 9:2 ESV)

He came into the darkness and the chaos to lead us back into the way of peace. Jesus would say later in his ministry:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. (John 14:27 ESV)

Jesus came into a troubled, fearful world and he brought a peace that is unlike anything that the world has to offer. Hear that this morning: If you are here today and you don't have a relationship with Jesus – if you're here today and you've been searching for peace – you'll only ever find it in Jesus.

He came to direct our steps and to lead us home. We were like a disobedient child who ran away from home and got himself lost in the woods. We needed someone to come into the woods to find us. We needed someone to show us how to get out – how to get home.

Sin got us cast out of the garden and angels with flaming swords guarded the entrance. But Jesus has come to do away with sin once and for all. He came to destroy our enemy, but even more than that:

The Redeemer shall not only break the head of the serpent that was the author of our ruin, but he shall *re-instate* us in the *mercy of God* and *re-establish* us in *his covenant*; he shall bring us as it were into a paradise again¹

He crushed the head of the serpent and opened wide the gates to God's perfect presence.

Zechariah saw this, and it filled him with joy!

Finally, Zechariah saw:

3. Our mission

So, our enemy has been destroyed and we've been brought home, but what do we do now? Did God save us to simply sit on our hands? Let's take a look at the text and try to see what Zechariah saw:

that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
⁷⁴ **that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,**
might serve him without fear,
⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (Luke 1:71-75 ESV)

Do you hear that? We were saved to serve! We were saved to live holy and righteous lives in the presence of God forever! That's how this rescue mission ends. Zechariah alludes to God's promise to Abraham. Do you remember what that promise entailed?

I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies,¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." (Genesis 22:17-18 ESV)

¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. 6 vols.; (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 32787.

God told Abraham that he was going to multiply his offspring and that, through the offspring of Abraham, the world would be blessed. Well guess what church? You and I are those children of Abraham! That's what Paul tells his church in Galatia:

And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.
(Galatians 3:29 ESV)

Matthew Henry puts this all together for us. He writes:

The great design of gospel grace is not to discharge us from, but to engage us to, and encourage us in, the service of God.²

God doesn't save us so to hide out in our basements and play x-box. He doesn't save us to withdraw from the world. He doesn't save us to bury our gifts. We were saved to serve!

And do you know what I love about this text? Zechariah says all of this as he is holding in his hands, not baby Jesus, but baby JOHN!

This whole song is inspired by the birth of Zechariah's son John the Baptist. Here's what's so amazing: Zechariah knows that the greatness of his son will not be measured by what his son does but instead by who his son will point to. He looks down at his baby boy in verse 76 and he says to him:

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, (Luke 1:76-78a ESV)

In a world full of men and women who delight in pointing everyone's attention to themselves, Zechariah praised God for a servant who would point the world to Jesus. And John the Baptist was that servant. In fact, when he saw that Jesus' ministry was coming to fruition, John humbly said:

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. 6 vols.; (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 32788.

He must increase, but I must decrease. (John 3:30 ESV)

O God, give us more men and women like John the Baptist. How quickly do we seek to steal the spotlight for ourselves. I see that wicked desire creeping into my heart more often than I would care to admit. But John knew what his life was about. I love what pastor Thabiti Anyabwile says here:

He will not be the savior, but John will make things ready for the Savior by teaching people how they are to be saved. John will be a giant index finger pointing the way to God's salvation from sin. Zechariah's prophecy defines John's life in relationship to Jesus' life and mission. Beloved, all lasting meaning is found when we define our lives this way.³

That was the greatness of John the Baptist. And can I tell you something? God has given you the means to be an EVEN GREATER WITNESS than John! That's what Jesus said:

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11:11 ESV)

John was great! John was the first prophet to truly pave the way for Jesus Christ. But you, Christian, are even greater! You're greater because you have seen more than John has seen! You're greater because you are filled with the Holy Spirit! You're greater because, as you preach the gospel you are operating with the power and authority of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords! Jesus said that too!

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20 ESV)

³ Thabiti Anyabwile, *Exalting Jesus in Luke*, Christ-Centered Exposition, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2018), 40.

Jesus says to us: “I have all authority in heaven and earth and I AM WITH YOU! I have crushed the serpent’s head! I am bringing you home! Now, PREACH! GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN! This is your mission.”

Christian, you have a purpose, and the more you align your life with that purpose, the more you will come to experience the joy of the Lord.

We’re approaching the new year and it’s about that time when we all begin to take a good, hard look in the mirror. Here’s a new year’s resolution for all of us: I hereby resolve to tell the world about Jesus. My family, my co-workers, my neighbours – anyone who is in relationship with me is going to hear the good news that JESUS HAS COME!

In a few minutes we’re going to go out those doors into parties filled with eggnog, turkey and people that we love who are on the road to destruction. People who are still living as slaves to the enemy. People who are still wandering around in the darkness.

What will God do? What does His rescue plan for them look like? I suspect it looks like you, mustering your courage and opening your mouth to tell them what the baby in the manger came to do.

God has transformed us. He has brought us up out of the darkness and He has prepared a place for us to live with Him forever. Therefore, let’s resolve to live a life that is worthy of this great calling. Let’s live a life of worship and service. Because the King has come.

This is the good news of the gospel. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let’s pray.