



Ben Blobaum's Sermon

SERMON – 1ST SUNDAY OF ADVENT NOVEMBER 27, 2022 “ZECHARIAH’S SONG”

This Advent season, we’re going to deviate slightly from the standard lectionary readings for Advent. On each of the four Sundays in Advent, starting today, Pastor Ken and I will be doing a four-part sermon series on the “Songs of Luke,” which are four songs of praise sung in response to the long-awaited arrival of God’s promised Messiah of Israel and Savior of the world.

Today, we’ll be looking at the Song of Zechariah, which we read as our Gospel lesson today. The song is often called the “Benedictus,” because, in the Latin translation, *benedictus* is the first word of the song, and it means “blessed.”

Zechariah breaks into this song of praise at the circumcision and naming of his son John, eight days after his birth. John’s birth and naming ceremony mark the fulfillment of God’s word to Zechariah through the angel, Gabriel, and Zechariah’s song is his response to God’s faithfulness in fulfilling his promises.

Prior to God’s visitation to Zechariah through the angel, Gabriel, we might have characterized Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth as lonely nobodies. Zechariah, being a descendant of the tribe of Levi, served as a priest. Being a priest could be lonely, in and of itself. First, it would have required Zechariah to leave his wife and home once a year to travel to Jerusalem, to serve his annual duty in the temple.

Moreover, being a Levite meant that Zechariah’s life was different from that of his fellow Israelites. The Levites were not to work normal jobs, nor did God permit them to be landowners; instead, they were literally *set apart* for service in the Lord’s house, to be a mediator between God and the people of Israel. To be “set apart” from everyone else can, at least at times, be very lonely, indeed.

But, exceedingly more than this, we might have regarded Zechariah and Elizabeth as lonely nobodies because they were both advanced in age and childless. Today, childlessness has become normalized and, even more shockingly, desirable. But in biblical times, children were regarded as a cornucopia of blessing, and grandchildren, according to the Book of Proverbs, “are the crown of the aged” (17:6).

By contrast, then, barrenness was regarded as a sign of divine disfavor, a sign of reproach, and so, childlessness was a source of disgrace and shame for a couple. And, as Luke tells us, such was the case for elderly Zechariah and Elizabeth.

But all of that changed on the day that God visited Zechariah through his messenger, Gabriel. Gabriel brought the word of the Lord to Zechariah that he and Elizabeth, despite their advanced age, would bear a son, and that they were to name him John.

Initially, the Lord’s promise through Gabriel was met with unbelief from Zechariah. On account of Zechariah’s unbelief, God made him mute, taking away his ability to speak, until the time that God’s word to him would be fulfilled.

In spite of Zechariah’s unbelief, however, God was faithful to his word. For after Zechariah returned home from his service in Jerusalem, Elizabeth did conceive and bear a son. And at their son’s circumcision, Zechariah and Elizabeth conferred on him the name John, as the Lord had

instructed.

“And immediately [John’s] mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God” (1:64). The words of blessing and praise that issued from Zechariah’s mouth were what we know today as the *Benedictus*, or the Song of Zechariah.

The content of Zechariah’s song is utterly remarkable and is not what one might have expected him to sing praise about. By opening Elizabeth’s barren womb and blessing her and Zechariah with a son, God had taken away their reproach and redeemed them among the people. One might, therefore, have expected Zechariah’s song of praise to have been about *that*. In other words, we might have expected him to sing about his son John.

Instead, the song is almost entirely about Jesus, who was, as yet, still in the womb of Elizabeth’s cousin, Mary. Even when Zechariah does turn, more than half-way through the song, to sing about his newborn son John, he praises God, not for removing his family’s reproach, but for God’s choosing of John to be the one to prepare the way for Jesus.

What makes this all the more remarkable is that nine months prior, Zechariah could not even believe God’s word that Elizabeth would bear a son. With an unbelieving heart, Zechariah was incapable of responding to God in song of faith and praise.

But now, chastened and renewed in faith by the judgment and mercy of God, we find Zechariah believing an even *greater* and unthinkable miracle – that the Child to be born to Mary is the long-awaited Messiah King of Israel, spoken of “by the mouth of [God’s] holy prophets from of old” (1:70).

Zechariah’s heart was now firmly established in faith that Mary’s Child was the fulfillment of God’s oath to Abraham, the One who would decisively fulfill all of God’s covenant promises, the One in whom all of Israel’s hope would be realized.

In the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth, then, we see the full effect of the gospel on glorious display. Out of the dead nothingness of a barren womb, life. Out of the dead, unbelieving heart, faith. And out of the mute, sinful tongue, praise.

Near the end of Zechariah’s song, he prophesies the coming day that “shall dawn upon us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” (vv. 78-79). Who are they who sit in darkness in the shadow of death? The whole fallen world, the entire human race – you and me.

To be under the power of sin and the Evil One is to live under the shadow of death. A death not merely of the mortal body, but a death that is eternal exclusion from the presence and embracing love of God.

Humanity’s only hope – the only hope for you and for me – is the day of which Zechariah prophesied. And, at the time of Zechariah’s prophecy, that coming *day* was only about three months away. For the redeeming light of God gleamed out into the darkness of this world through the face of an innocent Babe in a manger.

Reaching out through the centuries, by the ongoing apostolic mission of the church through Baptism, you and I have been grasped by that redeeming light of God in Christ Jesus. And so, through the matchless power of the gospel, Zechariah’s and Elizabeth’s story has become our story. For out of the nothingness of our sin and death, new and *abundant* life. Out of our dead, unbelieving hearts, faith. And out of our mute, sinful tongues, praise!

As if that weren’t already enough, Zechariah’s song concludes with the promise that God will “guide our feet into the way of peace” (v. 79). This is the Age of Peace of which the Prophet Isaiah spoke in our Old Testament lesson for today, when the people of God “shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” (2:4).

Notice the change in the tools that are mentioned here. At first, swords and spears. These are

the instruments fashioned by sinful humanity. Seeking our own interests above all, we inescapably build only tools to defend ourselves and to hurt and destroy others. But notice that, in the new Age of Peace, God's people don't simply toss aside their death-dealing tools; their tools of death are transformed into plowshares and pruning hooks, the very instruments used for the cultivation of *life*!

In Christ Jesus, we are not only saved from eternal death in the forgiveness of our sins; we are also transformed from workers of death to workers of life. Inaugurated by the Messiah of Israel, in the midst of this passing evil age, the Age of Peace has already begun!

One final question: how in the world is it that Zechariah and Elizabeth, two lonely nobodies, have become known and celebrated by all subsequent generations, for the last 2,000 years?! Surely, they must have *done something* that earned them notoriety.

So, as it turns out, they did nothing of the sort. In fact, they did nothing extraordinary, nor even hardly *anything at all*. On the contrary, their lives were changed forever, and their story told through the ages, entirely because of God's freely chosen visitation to them by his word, and because of what