

The Songs of Christmas #2 – Zechariah’s song
December 18, 2011 - Luke 1:57-80

Luke 1:57-80 ESV

[57] Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. [58] And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. [59] And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, [60] but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” [61] And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” [62] And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. [63] And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered. [64] And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. [65] And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, [66] and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him.

[Zechariah's Prophecy]

[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.

Can you imagine not talking for 9 months? Or not being able to communicate in the way you normally do for three quarters of a year? 9 months when you’d have to write everything down or make gestures or learn some signs. 9 months where you couldn’t yell up the stairs to the kids or talk on your phone. 9 months where you couldn’t sing or shout or whisper or clarify.

It would be quite an experiment to go through something like that. In fact, some of you might want to nominate one of your family members to participate in that experiment. You believe it might be good for them to not be able to

talk for 9 months. But I'm not going to initiate that project. Does anyone here have a family member they'd like to volunteer for this experiment?

Yet Zechariah had no choice. He spent 9 months in silence because of a rash response to a statement from God. Zechariah is one of the first people we meet in the Gospel of Luke. Zechariah was a priest. His wife Elizabeth also came from a priestly line. Both were righteous before God walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child because Elizabeth was barren. Both were advanced in years.

Every year, priests from across the country had to come to Jerusalem at an appointed time to help with priestly duties at the temple. So the account begins with Zechariah in Jerusalem with his division to serve in the temple. Some of these priests were given a special privilege actually going into the temple to offer the incense before God. Zechariah was chosen by lot to have that privilege. So he enters the temple of the Lord and offers incense in the Holy Place just outside the Holy of Holies. An angel then appears standing at the right side of the altar of incense. He announces to Zechariah - do not fear; your prayer has been heard; Elizabeth shall bear a son; you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth. He will be great before the Lord. He will turn many to the Lord their God. His name will be John." This child will signify an amazing act of God's intervention into Israel's and Zechariah's life.

But the impossibility of the situation weighs more heavily on Zechariah's mind than the ability of God. So here comes Zechariah's gaffe. He responds – *"How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years."* *"I don't see how you could do this God."* And the angel responds. *"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. I was sent to speak to you and bring you this good news. And you will be silent and unable to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."*

Zechariah comes out of the temple mute. He cannot speak so he makes signs to them. He finishes his time of service, goes home and Elizabeth conceives a child. Last week we met Zechariah and Elizabeth as Mary came to them after she was visited by Gabriel. Elizabeth's child leaps in her womb. It was the 6th month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Mary stays with them about 3 months.

Our account begins with the time of birth for Elizabeth's baby.

She gives birth to a son, fulfilling the angel's word. There was much rejoicing among her neighbors and relatives also fulfilling the angel's word. But Zechariah stays mute through the delivery. He still cannot talk for the first week of the child's life. Perhaps he wondered if the Lord forgot. When would he be released from this hindrance. 9 months of not speaking – 9 months to carry on in silence. 9 months to think about his doubting an angel of the Lord.

8 days after the baby's birth, it is time for the child to be circumcised. Apparently, a tradition had developed among the Jews where they would wait to name the child until the circumcision ceremony. This is the first record of this Jewish tradition in ancient writings. The Greeks waited 7 or 10 days before they named their children. The Romans waited 9 days. So maybe the Jews adapted this cultural tradition to this religious ceremony of circumcision.

A lot of people are there. In fact those present assume the child's name will be Zechariah after his father. This is interesting because there is really no precedent in 1st century Palestine for sons to be named after their fathers. Usually, they had a different name and their father's name would be attached after. So when Jesus blesses Peter for his confession of Christ, he says "Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah." Or James and John of the 12 disciples were known as James and John, son of Zebedee.

Perhaps the people present assume the couple will name the child Zechariah because of the affliction Zechariah suffers. He hasn't been able to talk for 9 months. But Elizabeth will have none of it. "No," she says emphatically. "He shall be called John." Now it's one thing for her to say no to naming the child after the father. The people would probably have accepted her words if she offered a name from their family. If she said "no, his name is Abijah after the priestly line of Zechariah, the people there might not have blinked. *Okay, so it's Abijah, son of Zechariah.* But it's quite another to give the child a name outside of the family relatives. The people there react to the name John. "None of your relatives is called by this name." Then perhaps showing the way they regarded women, they dismiss her statement and go to the father for his word.

Now in verse 62 we're told they made signs to the father, inquiring what he wanted the boy to be called. That's interesting. Wasn't Zechariah only mute? He couldn't speak but we're not sure he couldn't hear. There are two possibilities. The word translated mute can in some cases mean mute and deaf. So Zechariah might have experienced a double loss in his ability to communicate – no talking and no hearing. The other possibility is that the people are so excited and up in arms about Elizabeth's statements that they forget he can hear. So they make signs to him.

Whatever the reality, he asks for a writing tablet. This was a piece of wood with wax spread over the top. It must have been used multiple times over those 9 months of silence. He takes the tablet and does not write “He *shall be* called John.” Or “I think the name John sounds nice.” He writes “His name IS John.” There is no debate, no question, no negotiations. The matter is settled. Zechariah has come far in his 9 months of silence. He bows to God’s command without hesitation.

When he writes this, the last part of verse 63 tells us “and they all wondered.” They were all awestruck. Now we’re not sure why because the incredible miracle that is about to happen has not yet happened. It could be that they were awestruck that Zechariah answered the same way his wife answered. Maybe they expected the father to follow protocol and name the child from among the relatives. But more likely, they were awestruck at the resounding determination this couple showed to name their child outside the expected cultural norms. Here was a Godly couple with a priestly background. They were known for faithfully walking in God’s commands. Yet they were going radical on this one and were very strong in their convictions. Yet, such a name was incredibly appropriate for their child, He would be an outsider, living in the wilderness calling people to repentance before God away from all the trappings of religion in Jerusalem.

But if Zechariah’s writing on the tablet amazed them, what happened next would strike them with awe. “And immediately, his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came upon all his neighbors.” These events combine to mark this child as one commissioned to do some great work of God. The people talk about these events throughout the hill country. They wondered “what will this child be?” because of the remarkable nature of these events.

Then we come to Zechariah’s song. He has walked in a type of darkness for 9 months. He also lives in that culture, that we talked about last week where poverty, oppression, injustice and mere survival formed part of most everyone’s existence. Yet now he’s witnessed God’s intervention in his life personally and on behalf of His people.

So Zechariah speaks this poem that he’s had 9 months to work on. He speaks after 9 months of reflection on the Scriptures and the promises of God from the Old Testament. He speaks after watching the miracle of the pregnancy and safe delivery of the child unfold in his own life. He celebrates the Lord’s “out from the darkness” salvation.

Zechariah celebrates the Lord’s “out from the darkness” salvation.

Friends, I don't know where you are at today. But likely there is some darkness that you've walked through this past year or some dark place that you find yourself today. It might be the darkness of some loss. Maybe someone close to you died or a relationship ended. Maybe health issues have profoundly impacted your life or a family member's life. Maybe it's been a difficult year at work or with a relationship. Maybe you feel like you're in the tunnel and you're not sure if you see light at the end of it or a train coming to finish you off. Maybe you're in a dark place spiritually or not very passionate about God right now. I invite you to hear the song of one who walked in 9 months of darkness. Hear what he celebrates about God. Discover how he went forward from his own darkness into the light the Lord provided. After we've looked at Zechariah's reflection, we will have opportunity to respond to the Lord's provisions today to bring us out of our darkness. Zechariah celebrates the Lord's "out from the darkness salvation."

How is the Lord's salvation an "out from the darkness" salvation?

We must remember in this time period the Jews are a defeated, scattered and occupied people. What made their suffering even more acute was the freedom they tasted in the recent past. About 170 years before the time of Christ, the Greek dynasty of Seleucus rule over Judea, the small territory that remained of the nation of Israel. The Seleucid rule is harsh. But nothing compares with the rule of Antiochus the fourth Epihanes. He hates the Jews and wants to destroy them and their religion. So in 168 or 167 BC he goes into the temple in Jerusalem led by the priest Menelaus. Antiochus loots and desecrates the temple. He even sets up an idol to Zeus and sacrifices pigs on the altar by the Most Holy Place.

This abomination leads to a Jewish revolt now called the Maccabean revolt. Eventually the Jews recapture Jerusalem and purify the temple. This event is still remembered by Jews at Hannukah. The Maccabeans continue to rule and gain formal independence from the Seleucids in 142. But then along comes Rome. Syria becomes a Roman province in 64 BC. And in 63, a Roman general named Pompey invades Palestine ending the rule of the Jews. The Romans rule and allow the Herod the Great direct command under their authority. So the Jews are doubly persecuted, conquered and oppressed.

It's a far cry from life under the Maccabeans and even farther from life under King David. What happened to the Lord's promises to their father Abraham? But in the coming of this child, Zechariah sees the Lord's faithfulness to His promise. "The Lord has visited and redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his

servant David.” In the Old Testament, horns were not the kind you blew through to make a noise. They were the horns of animals. Strong beasts usually had horns. So horns became a symbol of strength. Zechariah sees the Lord raising up a horn of salvation through his own son. The salvation process takes a huge leap forward because of this child.

Zechariah sees in this action of the Lord salvation from their enemies and from the hand of all who hated them. Antiochus hated the Jews. Herod the Great hated the Jews. Many Romans hated the Jews. But Zechariah saw salvation coming to release them from this oppression. Yet Zechariah did not look forward to a life free from oppression so he could do whatever he wanted. He looked forward to a time when they could serve the Lord without fear, according to verse 74. After all they had been through as Jews, Zechariah desired a life that allowed unhindered freedom to serve the Lord for all his days. He saw the coming of his child as salvation for his people, bringing them out of the darkness of the oppression and hatred of their enemies.

In the second part of his prophecy, we see another way the Lord’s salvation is an “out from the darkness” salvation. **Zechariah celebrates the Lord’s purpose for the child to call people out of darkness. (76-79)** Mary first praised the Lord for intervening in her own life. Then she celebrated the Lord’s intervention on behalf of her people. But after 9 months of silence, Zechariah first praises the Lord for the intervention on behalf of the people and then celebrates the intervention in his personal life. Zechariah recognizes this child will be a Prophet of the Most High. There had been no prophetic word for 400 years. John will be the last Old Testament like prophet. Zechariah declares John’s purpose – to go before the Lord and prepare his ways. In those days, before a king travelled anywhere, there was an advance party that went before him. They scouted out the route of travel, watched out for danger spots and even straightened crooked path ways. They also prepared the people announcing, “the king is coming.” Poor people under a king better get ready for his passing through their village. He had the power to strike them down if they didn’t pay proper homage or lift them up if they impressed Him with their respect.

John will play a similar role for Jesus. But his role is to prepare them with knowledge of what Jesus will bring. He will awaken the people to their need for Jesus. Verse 77 – To give knowledge to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.” The salvation Jesus brought involved forgiveness of sins. Everyone needs that kind of salvation. So John preached a message of repentance. Turn from your sins because one is coming who will provide forgiveness for your

sins. Notice Zechariah does not say John will give them salvation. He will give *knowledge* of salvation, in the forgiveness of sins.

Zechariah concludes his song by pointing to the source and motivation of this salvation - the tender mercy of God. Then we come to his light/darkness conclusion. He compares God to the sunrise who visits the people from on high. The Jews hesitated to compare God to the sun because the pagans worshipped the sun. God deliberately emphasizes in the days of creation that He created the sun. Yet God is like a sunrise in that He brings light into darkness just like a sunrise dispels the darkness of night. This sunrise gives light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. There is light at the end of the tunnel. It's not a train. It's the light of God. So the people who receive the light receive guidance in God's way of peace – shalom – that wish for total well-being that Jews greeted each other with.

So the account concludes in verse 80, with the child growing strong in spirit and a life in the wilderness. That's where the prophets lived and came from. That's where the people would go to hear John's message of repentance.

God provided an "out from the darkness" salvation that was prepared by John and delivered by Jesus. Many received it and believed. But sadly, the nation as a whole rejected God's "out from the darkness salvation." Led by the religious elite, many of Jesus' own countrymen rejected him as Messiah. The first readers of this Gospel may have been struck with the irony and tragedy that would accompany Zechariah's words. For in less than 40 years, the Romans would do to Jerusalem far worse than Antiochus the fourth Euphianes did. The Jews revolted again. The Romans brutally suppressed them and laid siege to Jerusalem. They crucified thousands and threw thousands more off the temple mount onto the rocks below. They sacrificed in the temple and the city was destroyed again.

Jesus knew this was coming. So he weeps over the city because of their rejection of God's out from the darkness salvation. Notice the common themes with Zechariah's prophecy in Luke 19:41-44.

[Jesus Weeps over Jerusalem]

[41] And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, [42] saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. [43] For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side [44] and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation."

Zechariah rejoiced, Jesus wept. Zechariah celebrated God's visiting of His people. Jesus lamented that Jerusalem did not recognize the time of God's visitation. Zechariah looked forward to release from their enemies. Jesus prophesied the enemies surrounding and hemming them in on every side. Zechariah looked forward to walking the way of peace. Jesus mourned that they would not know the things that make for peace.

Perhaps in putting all this together, Luke wanted readers like you and me to grasp the greatness of God's salvation and the tragedy of rejecting it. In 70 in Jerusalem it was too late for hundreds of thousands of people. But it's not too late for you and me.

So today, we have an opportunity to respond to God's "out from the darkness" salvation. Will you let the Lord lead you out of your darkness?

One way we might do that is to **Remember salvation comes in the forgiveness of sins**. Meditate on the magnitude of your sin and the even larger magnitude of forgiveness from the Lord. Then look at your problems through that lens. Remember this can even help us deal with impatience in our own life. J. L. Packer writes, "Appreciate the patience of God. Think how He has borne with you, and still bears with you, when so much in your life is unworthy of Him and you have so richly deserved His rejection. Learn to marvel at His patience, and seek grace to imitate it in your dealings with others; and try not to try His patience anymore."

Or maybe we might **celebrate that we live in the age of salvation**. Zechariah looked forward to God's saving work. We get to look back at it. We already see much of the salvation plan – we are just waiting for the final act(s).

Or we might **Remember God's tender mercy** in our own lives. Not just mercy, but tender mercy. We might go forward with the knowledge and comfort of a mercifully tender God.

We might **give thanks that we can serve the Lord without fear of enemies**. Christians all over the world identify with Zechariah. They look for a day when they can worship the Lord without fear. But for now, they just continue on trying to survive and keep the faith amidst some intense persecution.

Some of us are in spiritual darkness today. **We need to receive anew or for the first time the Lord, our sunrise**. We need to stop closing the blinds on His light shining into our lives. We need to invite Him as Savior and Lord. And say Lord, shine your light into every dark corner of my life. Expose what's there and clean it because I don't want to walk in darkness anymore.

Some of us need to just continue our Christian walk. **We need to cooperate with the Holy Spirit so we can serve in holiness and righteousness all our days.**

When we let God, our sunrise, shine into our lives through His Word and through prayer, we then **let God guide our feet in the way of peace.** Living in a state of peace is possible no matter what is going on around you. Jesus promised this. “In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world.” “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives to I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Because John announced Jesus coming and Jesus came living, dying and rising and we received Jesus into our lives as Savior and Lord, we can walk in peace regardless of the darkness around us. So now I trust that the Holy Spirit has been speaking to you about one of these or some other response to God’s “out from the darkness” salvation. Let’s now go to God and respond to all He has provided.

Let Him guide you on the way of peace.