

## **"A Light in the Darkness" – Luke 1:67-80 – December 9, 2018**

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Our New Testament passage today continues the nativity story in Luke's Gospel. Last week we heard about how the Angel Gabriel made a startling announcement to the elderly Zachariah at the Temple in Jerusalem regarding his wife Elizabeth. After that, the angel visited a young woman named Mary in Nazareth with a scandalous announcement. It seemed that each woman, by the amazing power of God's Spirit, was going to be delivering sons that would have a major role in God's plan of redemption. Zechariah was completely blown away by the announcement given to him in the Temple, and he registered his doubt with the angelic messenger. Gabriel caused him to be unable to speak until the birth of the child.

Today our story jumps ahead a few months to the actual birth of Zechariah and Elizabeth's son. The townspeople have gathered around the family at the naming ceremony, completely thrilled and excited that this old couple had been blessed with a son. When the baby was named John, Zachariah, who had been mute since the Angel Gabriel had spoken with him, finally started speaking. He began praising God, which startled the townsfolk.

Our text says that Zechariah was filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit as he shared these prophetic words in the form of a song. His son John would have an important duty in God's coming redemption. John was to be the forerunner and prophet. John would prepare the way for the Lord. He would declare the Lord's salvation through the forgiveness of sins.

Zechariah goes on to prophecy that, in God's great mercy, God will cause the dawn from on high to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

These are the first words that come out of Zechariah's mouth since he was given the news of his wife's pregnancy. The old priest has had much time to contemplate in the silence of the previous months. As I think about this image, of the holy man being unable to speak for so long, I imagine that Zechariah spent much time listening to others, listening to his surprised and delighted wife and listening to the people around him. Hearing their hopes and dreams. Wondering at the future of his unborn son. Listening to the whisperings of God through the stories of his people. Studying the Hebrew scriptures,

reading the words of the prophets who came in times past. And contemplating the words of that angel in the Temple, who had said so much, but had left out so many details.

And in these intervening months of listening, Zechariah was open to imagining a vision for redemption, not only for his people, but for all people and all creation. The longings of Israel, the longsuffering of the world, the struggles of daily life, and the societal pains of oppression and injustice. The multiple ways that people are able to hurt one another. The way we divide ourselves from one another – how we erect barriers to keep others out, and close ourselves off from seeing possibilities through the eyes of those who understand things in different ways than we do.

Perhaps Zechariah, in looking at the struggles of humanity and the darkness that surrounds us, began to see what God was up to. Zechariah knew the promises of the prophets and the covenants that God had made with his people, and he believed in those promises. Maybe this was the time for those promises to be realized. Maybe this is what we had been awaiting for so long.

And so, unable to speak his thoughts, he allowed them to dwell, to percolate in his mind. And then at the naming ceremony of his son, the Holy Spirit helped him to form those thoughts and images into this amazing prophetic song. He spoke these words of redemption in the present tense – that this redemption has already been accomplished through God's savior. And his son would prepare the way for that one who would come.

Christians believe that in Jesus Christ God's promises have been fulfilled. Christ is the redeemer and the promises of God have been kept. But we also know that we live in the tension of waiting for the full realization of that fulfillment. We live in the in between time – what is often called, the "already but not yet." And that is what Advent reminds us of. We wait, we listen, we yearn for the fulfillment of God's promises, and we anticipate the birth of the savior. And on Christmas Eve, we celebrate the arrival of the One who will make all things new, who indeed has already made all things new.

While the secular world begs us into the early jollity of the holidays, the frenzy of decorating and shopping and wrapping, and the singing of reindeer and snowman songs, the brightness of colored lights, the season of Advent quietly pulls us back in. Advent reminds us to be silent, to give time to the songs of the prophets, to celebrate the promises of peace and justice and equality, and to anticipate the light of God who is coming into the world.

That is who Jesus is. He is the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. That is why we celebrate the holidays. The parties and the gifts and the decorations are outward expressions of our joy. But in the midst of the celebrations, people are still grieving, wars are being waged, children go to bed hungry, fires and earthquakes destroy, and people long for the simple touch of kindness. Our hope is in nothing less than the presence of God Almighty, taking on human flesh to dwell among us. In him there is no fear or pain. And nothing can or will ever separate us from his love. This is the hope and the joy that we are called to share with others. This is the song we sing.