

Benedictus: The Song of Zechariah

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning Christ Church.

My name is Susie and I'll be reading today's scripture lesson from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1, verses 11 through 17 and 67 through 80, as printed in the liturgy.

A reading from the Gospel according to Luke. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

[1 : 14] He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

And he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he said through his holy prophets of long ago. Salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant. The oath he swore to our father Abraham, to rescue us from the hand of our enemies and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

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

[2 : 36] And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he lived in the wilderness, until he appeared publicly to Israel. This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, Lord Christ.

Good morning, Christ Church. I'd love to just begin today by saying how much I love the elders of Christ Church.

These are men and women sitting in our pews this morning who've been gifted and called to the work of overseeing and shepherding this church. And I just have so much trust in them, so much respect for each of them in most situations, except for when it comes to our annual Christmas party and our white elephant gift exchange, which happened last night, in which case all trust and all respect just goes completely out the window.

These are some of the most vicious, cutthroat, cold-blooded, ruthless, heartless people you could ever meet. They will not hesitate to steal from you, to kill your hopes.

So I just want to say trust your elders unless there's a competition of some sort with a reward on the line, and in that case stay very, very far away from these callous and cruel people.

[3 : 53] So with that introduction to the sermon, we are in a series that we're calling the Songs of Christmas because this gospel, Luke's gospel, begins that way.

It begins with songs. It begins with singing about who the Messiah is, about why he's coming into the world, what he's going to do, and they're meant to give us understanding about the true meaning of Christmas.

And so far we've looked at the song Ave Maria in Luke chapter 1. It's the combination of these words to Mary from the angel Gabriel and from this fellow believer Elizabeth.

And the words of Ave Maria say, Hail Mary, you who are highly favored of the Lord. Blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

Jesus. We looked last week at Mary's song, The Magnificat. She says, My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. These songs, Ave Maria, The Magnificat, there have been many, many works that have been produced, countless musical works to reflect their beauty into the world.

[5 : 07] Next Sunday we're going to look at the Song of Simeon, the Nunc Dimittis, and maybe this song particularly rings in our hearts for some of us this Christmas. It says, Lord, you may now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.

And then on Christmas Eve we're going to be reflecting on the Song of the Angels, the Gloria in Excelsis Deo, which is so well known to us. It's in so many of the Christmas carols that we sing. But today we're going to look at what I would consider to be the least known of all these songs in Luke's gospel. And it's the Song of Zechariah, often known by its Latin title the Benedictus.

And it's this beautiful song of joy. It's been one of the most well-known songs of the New Testament throughout the history of the church, and yet it's probably the least known to us today.

And so on this third Sunday of Advent, I'm hoping that I can just help us get better acquainted with this Christmas song that's been sung by the church, it's been sung by God's people for the last 2,000 years.

[6 : 11] And I hope that you'll be able to sing it maybe in a fresh way after today. I want to look at it under three headings. First of all, that it's a song of benediction, and then that it's a song of liberation, and that it's also a song of preparation.

All right, so this is a song of benediction, liberation, and preparation. And let's look, first of all, at a song of benediction. If you look at verse 67, it says, His father, John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he prophesied, saying, Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel. So what's the first word out of his heart and out of his mouth? The Greek is eulogitos, which is where we get the word eulogy. Right?

And the Latin word is benedictus, where we get the word benediction. And what is a eulogy? What is a benediction? It's a good word about someone. It's a word of praise.

It's a word of blessing. A word of worship and adoration. And what we've seen in this little group of Elizabeth and Mary and Zechariah, this little community of believers right here at the beginning of Luke's gospel, is that they're just a people who are full of praise.

[7 : 31] Right? They're people who they can't contain their love for the Lord and the sense of joy that they find in Him. Their souls are just bursting forth with songs that they hope will bless the Lord and exalt the Lord and please and delight and honor and praise the Lord.

And this is showing us, I think, that worship is not primarily about us. Right? Worship is not primarily about our experience.

It's not about what we receive. It's not about whether or not we feel blessed. No. Worship is about making sure the Lord is blessed. It's making sure that He is praised.

And Mary is a beautiful model of this, as we saw last week. Zechariah is a brilliant example of this, of how we can offer up these Holy Spirit-filled songs, these prophetic and divinely inspired hymns that bless the Lord.

And what do we notice immediately about the theme and the focus of this song that's meant to praise and to bless the Lord? Well, Zechariah says this. He says, Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come to His people and redeemed them.

[8 : 48] He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David. I hope you have a pen or a pencil or something, because I'm going to encourage you to underline or circle some words today.

And kids, if you're following along, you've got a crayon or something, you can circle a couple words. So look at verse 68. You'll see a word that says, Redeemed. Circle that word, Redeemed.

Okay? And then in verse 69, you'll see this word, Salvation. Circle that word, Salvation. And then look down in verse 71, you'll see that word again, Salvation.

Circle that word. And if your eyes scan down the passage, verse 74, it says, you'll see this word, Rescue. Circle that word, Rescue.

And then again in verse 77, you'll see the word, Salvation. Just circle that word, Salvation. Why is Zechariah full of praise and thanksgiving?

[9 : 49] Why is he letting us know that the Lord is worthy and deserving to be praised? What is he telling us about the true meaning of Christmas here?

He's telling us that God is sending his son. God is sending the Messiah. God is sending a new David to what? To redeem us. To save us.

To rescue us. This is not a song about how we save ourselves. It's not even a song about the God who helps those who help themselves.

This is a song about the Lord God of Israel who's come to redeem and save and rescue, just as he promised he would do a long, long time ago. And this is what he says in verse 69.

He says, God, about a thousand years before Zechariah is singing this song, God gave a promise to David.

[10 : 54] And he said to David in that promise, he said, you're never going to lack a king from your royal line to sit on the throne of Israel. And he promised David, he said, one of your descendants is going to rule and reign forever over Israel.

And from Israel, he's going to reign over all the nations of the world. And his kingdom is never, ever going to end. It's a massive promise that God gave to David.

And yet with that massive promise comes a massive problem. Because the problem of the Old Testament is that David's throne fell. Right? David's kingdom crumbled.

When Zechariah is singing the song, there's been no king in David's line to sit on the throne of Israel for 600 years. They've been dominated by Babylon.

They've been dominated by foreign power after foreign power. Even now when Zechariah is singing, they're dominated by Rome. Now I wonder if any of us here today have ever found ourselves supporting a losing team.

[11 : 58] Anyone know what that's like? To support a team that's had a losing streak for a very long time? How many of your teams have been losing for 600 years?

Okay, Israel has been losing for 600 years. And God is telling Zechariah that I'm about to turn things around. That I'm going to fulfill my promise to put a king on David's throne who's going to redeem and save and rescue my people.

And through this coming Messiah, through this new David that I'm going to send into the world, he's going to fulfill all the promises that I've ever made. Not just to David, but to Abraham as well.

Look at verse 71, 72. He says that God is going to show mercy to our ancestors and remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham to rescue us from the hand of our enemies.

Mary sang this last week in her Magnificat. She said God made promises to Abraham in Genesis. And he promised that Abraham, and through Abraham and his offspring, all the nations are going to be blessed.

[13 : 09] And one of God's great promises to Abraham is that through one of your singular particular descendants, Abraham, I'm going to make your name so very great.

And you see, God's promises to David, God's promises to Abraham, they really go all the way back to the beginning, all the way back to Adam and Eve. And you can sort of just trace this golden thread of God's promises all the way back to that mother promise in Genesis 3, 15 that says the offspring of the woman is going to come, and he's going to be terribly wounded, and yet he's going to crush the head of the serpent.

And you know, if you're a Jew in the first century, a Jew like Mary or a faithful Jew like Zechariah, you absolutely cherish these promises from Genesis to Samuel to Psalms to the prophets.

And if you were to decorate your home for the coming of the Messiah, do you know what kind of things you would put in your front lawn if you were a faithful Jew in the first century?

You would not put Santa Claus, right? It would not be Charlie Brown. It wouldn't be Frosty the Snowman or the Grinch. No, who would you have in your front lawn? You would put these real historical people, these people who had real relationships with the living God, Adam and Eve,

Abraham and Sarah, the prophet Nathan, King David.

[14:39] These are the people you'd be excited about when you're celebrating the coming of the Messiah because you're seeing that now all of these, through all these people and the promises God made to them, God is fulfilling his promises.

And that is what, what is it that gives Zechariah such joy and such delight? What is it that causes him to want to bless the Lord, the God of Israel? What causes him to sing so passionately with praise and thanksgiving?

It's that these ancient promises, that God would send a child of Eve, that God would send a son of Abraham, that God would send a king in the line of David to redeem and save and rescue his people, that these promises are coming true now.

And so that's the question for us is, is this what Christmas means to you? Will your time and your energy, will your attention and your money in the season ahead be primarily devoted to praising and blessing the Lord and singing enthusiastically about the one that he sent to redeem us?

Or will our time and our energy and our money be devoted to something else, to lesser things that pale in importance and really don't matter all that much in the end?

[16:05] So Zechariah is inviting us and he's challenging us to make Christmas about benediction, to make Christmas about blessing the Lord, the God of Israel with words of praise, words of adoration for keeping his promises to redeem and save and rescue his people.

Does that make sense? It's a song of benediction. And that's what the church is meant to sing, songs of benediction to God. But secondly, it's not just a song of benediction, it's a song of liberation.

A song of liberation. You want to circle and underline some more words? You guys ready for that?

Verse 71 says that God is going to give us salvation from our enemies who hate us.

Circle that word, enemies. And you'll see it again in verse 74. God is going to rescue us from the hand of our enemies. Circle that word, enemies.

Here is Zechariah. He's filled with the Holy Spirit. He's been given prophetic insight into what God is going to do through his coming Messiah. And what he tells us in this song is that Christmas is all about liberation from our enemies.

[17:19] Christmas is about being released and set free from our enemies. And the critical question here is, who are our enemies? Who are these enemies who hate us?

These enemies who hold us in their iron grip of their oppressive hands. And if you're in the first century, you know the obvious answer about who your enemies are is it's the Romans. Romans. They're clearly the enemy.

Right? This occupying power of these pagan, non-Jewish, idol worshipers who enforce the Pax Romana by crucifying their enemies and confess that Caesar is the Lord.

Those are the enemies, right? I mean, isn't that, isn't the Roman Empire the hand of the enemies who hate us? Surely the enemy. Surely the problem with the world is out there somewhere beyond us.

They're the baddies and we're the goodies. And God is surely sending his Messiah to deal with them, right? Isn't that what this prophetic song of Zechariah is all about?

[18:31] Take that as an amen. Bam. Bam. Bam. So I want you to underline and circle a couple words that might feel a little uncomfortable this morning.

Words we might not like to hear but words that are nevertheless part of the story of Christmas. And in verse 77, you'll find it says, God's gonna give his people knowledge and salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

Circle that word, sins. And then in verse 79, it says that he's gonna shine on those living in darkness, circle that word darkness, and those living not only in darkness but in the shadow of death.

Circle that word, death. Now do you see who our enemies are who hate us and who hold us in the iron grip of their oppressive hands? It's sin.

It's darkness. It's death. This is what we human beings need to be liberated from. Sin is not out there. It's not beyond us. It's not over there in those baddies.

[19:35] No, sin, Zechariah says, it's in here. It's inside of us. It's in those of us who think we're the goodies. Right? We don't need to be liberated politically and sociologically from Rome or from whoever is the governing power that's creating all the problems.

No, he says, what we need to be liberated from is not a sociological problem or a political problem. It's a spiritual problem and it's a moral problem. What we need to be liberated from is ourselves. It's ourselves. What is sin? Right? Why is it so bad that God had to become a human being and die to deal with it?

Sin in a word is self-centeredness. Right? Sin is rebellion of the self against the authority and the love of God. Sin is self-assertion against God.

Sin is a dethroning of the Lord and an enthroning of myself in place of the Lord where He deserves to be. Sin is simply self-deification.

[20 : 46] It's behaving as if I were the Lord. And because that's true in my heart, because that's true in your heart and in every heart, we're living under a cloud of darkness and death.

The effect of sin in this world is darkness and death, Zechariah says. He gives us this amazing picture in verse 79. And he says, I just want you to imagine a picture of a number of people.

They're going on a long journey and they're traveling a far distance to this certain city and they believe that if only they reach that city and they get to that city and they get inside of that city, they're going to be satisfied.

They're going to be happy. But alas, with this whole group of people traveling on this road, the sun has set on them. Right? The night has descended upon them and the whole place where they are is covered with a thick darkness so that they just can't see and they can't go on and they're living there and they're settled there.

In fact, it says that they're sitting there in hopelessness and in despair. Right? The city that they were seeking, they can no longer even see the city.

[21 : 58] They've lost the road to the city. They don't know where they are. They see no path in front of them and so they just simply sit down. And that's just, that's not even the end of their troubles because they realize that they're exposed out here in this open country on the way to this place to terrible dangers.

Right? They're not only sitting in darkness but they're also sitting in the shadow of death. They realize that out here at any moment they can be attacked by wild beasts and set upon by robbers and thieves and murderers because out here there's no city wall in the open country to protect you. There's no police to come and defend you. They don't know where they are. They don't know how to get to where they thought they were going. They're just helpless and they're hopeless just sitting there in the darkness.

At any moment they might be overwhelmed and be put to death. And the result of this darkness and this threat of death is a deep unhappiness, a deep misery and anxiety.

They're living in a deep sense of discontentment and depression and despair. And Zechariah says this is the picture of our hearts in sin. It's the picture of our world in sin that we're lost.

[23 : 23] We're stranded. We're stuck in a state of darkness and death and we're unable to arrive at our desired destination where we would be safe and where we would be satisfied.

Sin and darkness and death, these are the enemies who hate us and are constantly attacking us and holding us in the iron grip of oppression. And this, Zechariah says, is the reason for Christmas. This is the condition from which we need to be liberated and released and set free. And without this, we simply cannot understand what Christmas means.

We can't understand why God would send a Messiah for us. But it's this bad news that makes the good news shine all the brighter. Because look at verse 77.

It says, that the rising sun will come to us from heaven and shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. And He is the one who will give us the forgiveness of our sins.

[24 : 26] The question is, who is this rising sun from heaven? Who is this, as the old King James Version says, who is this day star, this day spring from on high that will shine upon us?

Is it not Jesus Himself? Jesus who says in the Gospel of John, He says, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.

Christmas says that Jesus is our sunrise. Jesus, in the midst of this world and darkness and sin and death, Jesus is the morning sun who comes and scatters the night away.

Jesus is the one who brings the dawn of a new day. A dawn of a new day that brings forgiveness and healing that brings beauty and joy.

The dawn of a new day that enables our feet to be guided in the path that we lost, the path of peace, the path of peace with God and peace with each other. And this is why we love to sing this

great hymn of Advent when we sing, O come thou day spring, O come thou rising sun, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here.

[25 : 42] Disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows put to flight. Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

My question for you, if you're here today and exploring Christianity and you're just kind of curious and open and discovering who Jesus is and what he claimed to be for the first time, my question for you is are you able to deal with your enemies?

The real enemies that threaten you and haunt you, the enemies of sin and darkness and death, are you able to deal with those enemies in your own limited resources and your own finite strength?

Or do you need someone much greater than you, much stronger than you to come and be your liberator, to come and give you liberation? And if you're a Christian, my question for you is does this liberation, the liberation that our Messiah Jesus brings, does that thrill you?

Does that kind of overwhelm you like it overwhelms Zechariah? Does it cause you to burst forth with song and say praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he's come to save us from our enemies?

[26 : 58] It's a song not only of benediction and praise, but it's a song of liberation and rescue. But finally, I want you to see it's a song of preparation.

It's a song of benediction, it's a song of liberation, and finally, it's a song of preparation. Because Zechariah, he gives us this Holy Spirit filled prophetic song, and it's a song about the Lord, it's a song about the Messiah that the Lord is sending to save us from our enemies.

But it's also about the role that his son, John the Baptist, is going to play. It's about how John the Baptist is going to prepare people and make them ready for the Lord.

And that's what it says in verse 76, it says, and you, my child, you, John the Baptist, you're going to be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him.

And if you know anything about John the Baptist's life and his ministry, you know that part of preparing the way of the Lord meant that John simply just stood there in front of people and he pointed, right?

[28 : 09] He would just point to Jesus. And the main thing John would say is he'd say, behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

John would just stand there and he'd point and he'd say, this is the one. This is the one that God has sent to bear our sins and our punishment in himself on his cross. This is the one.

He's the only one. The only means by which God's tender mercy can flow into our lives. The only means by which God's forgiveness can come to us in a life-transforming way.

And what's the whole point of being redeemed, being saved, being rescued, being forgiven by him, Zechariah sums it up in verse 74. He says he's going to rescue us from the hand of our enemies to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And that's what John the Baptist was preparing people for. Right? He said this is the whole point that God desires for all the people that he's made in his image to rediscover the meaning of their existence.

[29 : 16] He wants all people everywhere to rediscover the purpose of their lives which is that they might become his fearless servants again. That people everywhere might become his holy servants again.

That people might become the righteous servants of God. That is what John the Baptist is preparing men and women and children for. And that, frankly, is what the church is here to prepare people for. That's what we're all to be preparing people for. See, John the Baptist had a unique historical role as the forerunner and the preparer of the Messiah.

And yet it's true, isn't it, that all Christians have a responsibility, all Christians have a privilege to, as it says about John, go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him. And that means that we, all of us, would share our lives and we would share our faith with our family, our friends, our neighbors, our coworkers.

That we would just stand there like John and do this. And that we would just bear witness to Jesus and we would introduce other people that God is preparing for himself to Jesus.

[30 : 33] And why do we do this? Why does the church, why does a healthy church, a living church engage in this project? Why are we praying for people who don't know the Lord that they might be curious about the Lord?

Why are we praying right now as a church that our friends would open their minds and their hearts to just explore faith for maybe the first time or the first time in a long time? Why do we go before the Lord to prepare the way for him by inviting people to just come and share a meal at our table? Why are we sharing our lives with people? Why are we engaging with them in simple and serious and spiritual conversations? Why are we putting so much energy and time and effort into our Alpha course starting this spring?

Well it's right there at the very end of Zechariah's song in verse 77. The reason we're preparing people for the coming of the Lord into their lives is that we want them to experience what we've experienced.

We want them to know the joy of what it's like to have their sins being forgiven. We want them to know the joy of what it's like for their darkness to turn into light.

[31 : 51] We want them to know the joy of being released from the fear of death and having a sense of victory over death. We want them to know what it means to have feet that are led into peace with God.

Not a conflicted relationship with God but peace and reconciliation with God. Peace and reconciliation with other people. That's what we want people to know that ultimately they would come to experience the freedom and the joy that we've experienced that they would serve the Lord without any more fear in their lives.

That they would serve the Lord in holiness before God and righteousness before God all their days. That is the task and the mission of the church collectively that is the task and the mission of every Christian individually is to go before the Lord to prepare people for his coming into their lives.

And my friends the question for us today is do you accept the mission? The mission should you choose to receive it is to go before the Lord to prepare people for his coming into their lives.

And so this Christmas will we pray? Will we plan? Will we make invitations? Will we engage in conversations in such a way that at least one person that God has put into our lives might be made ready?

[33 : 20] Might be prepared for the coming of the Lord into their lives? May it be so in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Amen.