The path to peace

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Preacher: Andy Lloyd

[0:00] Well, good morning all again. Nice to see you. We're here in the second week of Advent and second week of our mini-series as we run up to celebrating the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day.

And we're looking this morning at a passage in Luke chapter 1, begins with the narrative of the birth of John the Baptist and then the wonderful song that Zechariah sang, a song of praise and prophecy that he sang when his mouth was unstopped from having been numb for a while.
So let's read together from Luke chapter 1. Oh gosh, that's a bit small, isn't it? Let's see where we get on. When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy and they shared her joy.
On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah. But his mother spoke up and said, no, he's to be called John.
They said to her, there's no one among your relatives who has that name. Then they made signs to his father to find out what he would like to name the child.
[1:27] He asked for a writing tablet and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, his name is John. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free and he began to speak, praising God.

All the neighbours were filled with awe and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking what is this child going to be?
For the Lord's hand was with him. 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 his father Abraham. To rescue us from the hand of our enemies and to enable us to serve him without fear.
[2:44] In holiness, righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called the prophet of the most high. 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. And the child grew and became strong in spirit.
And he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel. Goodness, there's a lot in that, isn't there? Isn't that a great passage?
Next slide, please. So a little bit of background and context here. Zechariah and Elizabeth were of a good age. They were not youngsters.
[3:46] And Elizabeth had not been able to have children. She's described as barren. She'd not been able to have children. And they had passed the age where normally women would get pregnant.

And so they had accepted their lot. Except that there was a yearning there for a child. And it's just worth reminding ourselves that women who didn't have children in those days were deemed to have done something which obviously displeased God.
So there was a stigma attached to being childless. Blessedly, that's not the case now. But it was then. But they were righteous people.

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They were people who lived their lives in the presence of God. According to His will. It says that they lived blamelessly.
I'll come back to this, but there's a real challenge. A real challenge for us. That we're people who are called to live according to God's Word.
[5:00] And as I've been reflecting on this, I've been thinking, goodness, blameless, righteous, are not necessarily words that I would easily take on for myself.

And then an angel appeared to Zechariah. It's a wonderful season, this, as we read Scripture and angels turn up.
And they always say, don't be afraid. Always. And Zechariah later in the conversation with the angel said, yeah, right. Which didn't lead to a good thing for him.
But actually, I think if an angel appeared to me and said, don't be afraid, I might say, yeah, right. But an angel appeared and said, your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.
Not the first time this narrative has happened in Scriptures. But all the same, quite a startling thing to say.
[6:08] And Zechariah. To Zechariah. And Zechariah doubted it. He basically said, and this is the Andy Lloyd version.

Are you serious? She's a bit old for that. Old love. That's what he said. Old love. A bit old for that.
I think the time has passed. And the angel said, well, it's going to happen. And because he doubted, although he was a righteous man, or promise blamelessly, he doubted the word.
The word of God. The promise made to him through the angel. And he was struck dumb. He was struck dumb. He couldn't speak. Now, he'd been in the sanctuary.
So, he'd been a while. And they all assumed that he'd seen a vision. And he came out. And they realized that he'd seen a vision. Seen God. And he couldn't speak. And they just, presumably, just took him home and said, it'll be right in due course.
[7:14] But he was struck dumb. And then, in verse 37, which I didn't read out just before this passage.

How can this be, he said? How can this be? For nothing will be impossible with God. Nothing will be impossible with God.
God. Wonderful little bit of context there. If we turn to the next slide, please.
John then had a role, a calling. And this is what Zechariah said. He prophesied that his son would have this role.
Now, whenever I meet a small child, a newborn, I love holding a tiny in my arms. And praying for it, for him or her.
[8:20] But also thinking, I wonder what's going to happen in your life. I wonder what you'll turn out to be. I don't mean, I hope that you turn into a millionaire doctor or something.

I just mean, I wonder what life is going to be. And what your character will be. I wonder what God will bless you with. And Zechariah will have held his son and felt all of those ordinary, normal, loving, overwhelming things that new parents feel for a newborn.
And for those without children, as you hold a newborn and love them and want the best for them.
And Zechariah did all that and he said then, John, you're going to be great in the sight of the Lord.
Wow.
What a wonderful thing to be able to say to your son. You will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord your God.
[9:31] He will go on before the Lord in the spirit of power of Elijah to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedience and the wisdom of the righteous to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

All of those things. You've got a big job, John. A big job. The Lord's hand was with him.
The Lord's hand was on him. The Lord's hand is on you too. Next slide, please.
And I just thought it would be worth focusing for a moment on this idea of turning hearts. Because Zechariah tells John, and it's recorded in Scripture, that he will turn hearts.
And I've been thinking about, what does that mean? How do you turn hearts? Because you can't turn hearts by shouting at people.
[10:40] You can't turn hearts by saying you're really stupid. Do you not understand the truth of Jesus? You can't turn hearts by demanding, by power or authority or buying it.

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We have to turn hearts by who we are. By who you are. By how you interact with those who don't yet know Jesus.
But also, for those of us who do know Jesus. You see, this idea of revolution, of turning away from one thing to another, of turning hearts, is fundamental to our calling as Christians.
It's fundamental to who we are in Jesus. But it doesn't mean we have to bash people.
It means we have to be righteous as far as we can. It means that we have to follow God. Follow the rules. Follow the call of God.
[11:55] And something that I feel very and profoundly moved by at the moment, this idea of turning parents to their children.

I don't know that it's simply parents to their children. But it's about family. About how God cares deeply about family.
About your family. About your family where there is struggle or strife. Disappointment or sadness. Worry and anxiety. Joy and delight. God is passionately interested in turning hearts in that context.
And sometimes, and perhaps I would include myself in this sometimes, despair and desperation comes in.
[13:04] An angel hasn't come to me and said, it's going to be alright. But God's Word says it's going to be alright. Our job. Our job.

Our calling in Jesus Christ. Through the power of the Holy Spirit. Is to turn hearts. And if you would join me in praying for the families of this nation.
The families of this world. As a sociologist. The family is the building block of our society. I could go on but I won't. Allow yourself.
Allow yourself. Allow yourself. The privilege. Of turning hearts. Of parents to their children. Of children to their parents. Of children to their siblings.
Of parents to their relatives. Turn the disobedience to their children. Turn the disobedience to the wisdom of the righteous. There's a lot in that.
[14:12] But this idea. That as we be. As we are. As we live. A life devoted to Jesus.

We point the way. To a different way. We point the way. To obedience. And righteousness. Before God.
Because. We need. To become. A people. Prepared for the Lord. A people. Prepared for the Lord.
And it's a wonderful thing. For a church to have. As its corporate calling. Prepare. People. For the Lord. For us. For us.
But for us. As individuals. For us. As families. For us. As whatever. How do we just be. How do I just be. To help people.
[15:13] Prepare themselves. And be prepared for Jesus. And turn hearts. Towards God. Okay.

The birth of John. Next slide. Thank you. John was born. And Elizabeth. Elizabeth's friends and neighbours. Saw that the Lord had showed a great mercy.
And they shared her joy. I just wanted to mention that. It's not surprising. Because people are always pleased. When children. Almost always pleased. When children are born. But just something here.
About the delight. In somebody else's blessing. Elizabeth had lived. With. The societal shame.
Of being childless. And suddenly. There was a baby boy. And the neighbours and their friends.
[16:11] Delighted with her. They shared her joy. One of the sad things. About. Modernity. Is that. If something good.

Happens to you. I almost have. Permission. To feel slightly resentful. Why does it happen to you. Not to me. I wanted that. I would have liked that. That's not fair. Why haven't I been given that. And in churches too.
Why doesn't God bless me. Like they've just blessed so and so. How come. And there's just something very.
Beautiful. About God has blessed you. And I rejoice. God has blessed you. And I give thanks. Just a passing.
[17:06] Note. There. And then there was this. Rather fun bit. Where. They. They. They took. John to be circumcised. And then they were going to name him.

And. Everybody thought that he ought to be named. Zechariah. After his father. Which would have been really difficult. For the postman. Because he wouldn't have known. Who his letters were for. And.

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Elizabeth said. No. No. No. It's not Zechariah. Too hard to spell. John. John. What? John. There's no one in your family called John.
That's not how we do things around here. We call them after the family. We have family names. That's how it works. No. No. No. John. And then.
And it says in. In. In. In my version. In the. In the international version. They gave. They asked. Zechariah asked for a writing tablet. Which made me giggle a bit. It's like an iPad. But.
[18:06] A bit older. A slate. And he said. His name will be John. And Elizabeth went.

See. And the minute. That Zechariah said. His name will be John. His mouth was unblocked. And he began to worship God.
Praise God. And prophesy. So there's something there. To start with. And that was just the introduction. By the way. So I hope you got your sleeping bags.
There's something there. You look so worried now. It's great. Something there. About the way that we can see. This episode. Playing out. With a couple.
And with their friends. And with their neighbours. And the birth. Of this little boy. Who at the time. Nobody knew.
[19:10] Although Zechariah was getting an inkling. Of his significance. In the role of. In the part. Well the part he plays.

In the life. Of Jesus. Okay. So. If we think of Zechariah's song.
John. 68 to 79. Verses 68 to 79. In Luke chapter 1. So it's one of a number of songs. That people sing.
As they have been visited by angels. Or as they have. Something significant has had. In their lives. And it's a beautiful song. John will be called a prophet.
John will be called a prophet. He will be one. Who points. To the truth of Jesus. Now importantly.
[20:10] John. Wasn't a god. John wasn't God. John was a man. Who would grow up to be a man. But he would be.

A prophet. He would speak words. Which point to God. Speak words. Which point to the truth. Of who Jesus is.
There's not much else to say about that. Apart from. Let's make sure that we remember. That people who are mightily anointed.
Are simply flesh and blood. They can speak prophecy. Marvellous. It's good. They can play music. Fantastically. So can our lot.
But they're not God. They're not a God. They're simply flesh and blood. John will be a prophet. He will give the people.
[21:09] The people knowledge. Of salvation. Through the forgiveness of sins. Somewhere in our language. In our brain.

In our conversation. We have to have logged. That phrase. That comment. That observation. Which gives people knowledge of salvation. Through the forgiveness of sins. And we have a job there to do. Because as soon as you talk about.
The forgiveness of sins. In a modern society. People look at you slightly funny. What do you mean? The forgiveness of sins. Because that's not.
In the language. Of many. Many. Many. Many. Of our contemporaries. So we have this responsibility.
[22:14] And this is. This is where it gets quite complicated. The responsibility that we're given. We have a responsibility. Not to say you are a wicked sinner.

And I'm going to point you into. The direction of all truth. Because there's too many words. That have all sorts of complications. But how do I. As I wander around.
My slightly complicated life. Bumbling into slightly complicated people. How do I give knowledge. Give people the knowledge of salvation. Through the forgiveness of sins.
How do I do it? And how do you do it? And I frankly. I don't know all the answers. And actually. That's something that for each of you.
You need to wrestle with. How do you do it. In your life. With the people that you bump into. With your neighbours. With your friends.
[23:14] Because that's what John and Zechariah did. It was their neighbours and their friends. And they just said look. And they said yep.

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We delight with you. And then these three phrases. That I think. Have real significance. And resonance this morning.
They will know God's tender mercy. Tenderness. Gentleness. Lovingness. If lovingness is a word. God. That beautiful. Generosity. Of almighty God. Who is tenderly. Merciful. To us.
They will know a light. Shining in the darkness. One of the things that we have. Fiona and I have. Is the privilege of driving back. Over the moors.
[24:11] In the dark. Or driving out in the dark. Over the moors. At this time. Of year. And the moors are dark. I don't know whether you noticed that.

But the moors are dark. And if there's heavy cloud cover. Which there often is. And if it's raining. Which it often is. And if it's late. Which it often is.
It's dark. And the light. Of the car. Our car. Gives us the direction.
In which to go. We know the road. We know the road very well. I've driven that road many times. Many of us have. I know where all the twists and turns are. But it's not unusual. If it's dark.
And it's late. That as I've been driving along. I suddenly think. Am I sure I know where I am on this road? Not because. I'm being stupid.
[25:07] Well. I'll leave that for you. But because. There's no fixed points. There's nothing to say.

Oh yeah. We're coming through this town. Or this village. Or we're coming past. It's just road. We need to be.
Offering some fixed points. To people on a dark road. You're here. Jesus is here. There is light here.
And we will show you that light. We will show you. The light. Shining. In the darkness. Jesus.
And then this wonderful phrase. Which is the theme of the sermon. He will guide our feet. In the paths of peace. In a world which is.
[26:09] Whichever way up you look at it. Not very peaceful. In a society. Which is not very peaceful. In a town. Which is not very peaceful.

And maybe if I'm really honest. In my life. Which sometimes maybe often lacks peace. Jesus. Guides our feet. Into paths of peace. What does that mean for you? There's homework from this today.
I'm not going to tell you. Because I think it's different for each of us. What's the implication. Of knowing God's mercy. His tender mercy.
In your life. And the life of those that you know. How do you shine the light in the darkness? And what does it mean? To walk in paths of peace.
[27:09] How do I create the conditions. How do I create the conditions. Where that can happen. I've got work to do on that. I've got real work to do on that. How do I create the conditions.

Where my life. My walk. Can be in the paths. Of peace. But what a wonderful gift. To give. To those that know us.
Our friends. And our neighbours. And each other in this fellowship. And our families. Next slide please. A little quote from Billy Graham.
Billy Graham looking quite stern there. Christ alone. Can bring lasting peace. Peace with God. Peace among people and nations. And peace within our hearts.
Only through Christ. Only through Jesus. Can we find. That peace. Next slide please. This is one way of preparing it.
[28:13] One way that. Very very well known. Passage. A voice of one calling in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert. A highway for our God. Every valley should be raised up.

And every mountain should be. A hill. Mounted and hill made low. The rough ground should become level. And rugged places of plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed. And all people will see it together.
It's a wonderful image there. Of if you look at a picture. Of a path up a hill. And you think. Wow that's going to be quite hard work that. And then all of a sudden.
Everything's leveled out. It's been like there's been a massive bulldozer. And it's all flattened out. That would be really irritating. For those of us that like mountains. But it would be great for walking easily on.
The glory of the Lord will be revealed. And all people will see it together. Why? The mouth of the Lord has spoken.

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[29:20] Teachers. Bless you. Are wonderful people. I had some teachers who weren't necessarily wonderful people. And one of the things they said to me.

And I wasn't necessarily a wonderful pupil. I have to say. In fact I wasn't a wonderful pupil. I was probably really irritating. But from time to time they would say.
Do it. Because I've said it. The mouth of the teacher. Has spoken. And that was an indication. I'm not going to discuss this with you any further.
You're going to do it. Now sometimes we discussed it further. And that wasn't always finishing well for me. The mouth of the Lord has spoken.
This is it. Jesus has the authority. To speak absolute truth. And absolute guidance.
[30:19] Into the lives of you. And us as a church. And us as a town. And us as a country. And us as a world. The mouth of the Lord has spoken.

How is it happening like this? How is it going to happen? That a woman who is old and past childbearing age. Is going to have a child? Because the mouth of the Lord has spoken. How can it be that my family.
Who are in a bit of a pickle at the moment. And doing some daft things. Can rewrite themselves. And come back to fellowship and truth. Because the mouth of the Lord has spoken.
How can it be. That the thing that is waking me up. At four o'clock in the morning. And making me feel sad. Or nervous. Or anxious. Or whatever. How can that be.
That this will be okay. Because the mouth of the Lord. Has spoken. We worship. A powerful. Almighty God.
[31:16] Incidentally. Just to be really clear. Sometimes things that we desperately want to happen. Don't happen. Because the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

He is sovereign. He decides. He says. Okay. We need to move on. So what about us?
God calls each of us to his service. To turn hearts to him. As the Holy Spirit works in us. We need to seek to live in righteousness.
There's a challenge. Our job is to point people to Jesus. Jesus. And importantly there.
Not to ourselves. Please don't point people to me. I've got too many flaws for that. Not to a church building.
[32:14] Or a particular theological position. Just point to Jesus. And the tender mercy of God. Jesus will do the work.

We do the pointing. We call to prepare. A path. To peace. As we ourselves. Live lives of peace.
If we're peaceable people. Folk will be attracted to us. And we can do this.
Not through any strength of ours. But because nothing is impossible. With God. The mouth of the Lord has spoken. And the Lord's hand.
Is with us. Amen.

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