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Luke 1:68-79

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## BENEDICTUS: BLESSED BE THE GOD WHO COMES

During my college days in Lincoln, Nebraska, I lived in a fraternity house. There was no dinner on Sunday nights, but fortunately, my grandparents also lived in Lincoln. Many a Sunday night I'd walk into their house unannounced. As soon as my grandmother saw me, she would say, "Oh, I thought you might come over tonight. I baked some rice pudding." Or she would say, "I made some apple cobbler." After commenting on the perception that I was looking rather thin, she would seat me at the dining room table. It was a huge Bavarian table, with seating aplenty for 14, a place where we had often gathered for holiday meals. Then she'd fill the table with food: leftover roast beef, ham, potatoes, vegetables, fresh baked bread, and pickles. There were always at least three kinds of pickles. My grandparents were old and very poor. I could never figure out where she kept all this food. But before long the gigantic table was half full of food of all varieties. I would dine as if I were a king, sitting on one of those big German chairs that you couldn't pick up if you tried. When the main meal was finished, she'd bring out the rice pudding or apple cobbler that she had baked that very day. My mouth waters as I reflect on this memory.

As I look back now, it seems my grandmother lived her Sundays during my college years in anticipation of an unannounced arrival. She expected that at any moment I would enter the room and bring joy to her heart. In the same way, Advent is a season of anticipation and celebration as we remember the first coming of Jesus and await his second coming. Advent is a season of longing hearts and joyous praise.

The elderly Zechariah and Elizabeth, like many other Jews, also lived in anticipation of an immanent arrival: the long promised and long awaited arrival of the Messiah, the Anointed One, the one whom the Jews hoped would change their dark world. For indeed their world was very dark, with Rome in control and Herod king over Judea. But Zechariah and Elizabeth had lived simply, devoting themselves to God. Luke adds, "they were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord" (1:6). But as they grew in years, a deep sadness lingered in their hearts. They had not been able to have children, and now age had eliminated that possibility.

Zechariah was a priest and, according to custom, the time would come for his division to serve in the temple. On one occasion when his division was on duty he was chosen to enter the temple and burn incense. This was a great honor, a once in a lifetime experience for Zechariah, since many priests never were chosen for this service.

On this historic day, Zechariah entered the temple alone, while the worshippers gathered outside to pray. His already heightened

sense of awe was transcended by the appearance of the Angel Gabriel. The angel conveyed to him that his prayers had been heard, and that he and his wife would have a son. Gabriel said that the boy's name was to be John; that he would be a source of joy to man; that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit, and that he would prepare the way for the Lord with the spirit and power of Elijah. When Zechariah expressed disbelief at the possibility of having a child, Gabriel closed his mouth.

Returning home, Zechariah found that Elizabeth had indeed become pregnant, just as Gabriel had promised. She had joined a select list of barren women who conceived supernaturally—Sarah, Rebekah, Rachael, the mother of Samson, and Hannah. Mary would soon join that list of women, as Luke weaves together the pregnancies of Elizabeth and Mary in the first chapter of his gospel.

After the birth of the promised son, the family and friends of Zechariah and Elizabeth shared in the joy that had replaced the disgrace and shame of the childless, elderly couple. They all gathered on the eighth day to circumcise the child and confer upon the boy his name—a surprise twist since that honor was reserved for the father. The relatives chose the name Zechariah, but Elizabeth protested and said his name would be John. When the relatives questioned this choice, since no one in the family was named John, Zechariah signaled, "His name is John." Immediately Zechariah's mouth was opened and he began to praise God. In fact, he sang a song that is recorded in Luke's gospel. Its title in Latin is *Benedictus*, which is the first word of the text, "blessed."

Our focus this morning is on these holy lyrics, the words that the Spirit spoke through Zechariah.

**"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
For He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His  
people,  
And has raised up a horn of salvation for us  
In the house of David His servant—  
As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of  
old—  
Salvation FROM OUR ENEMIES,  
And FROM THE HAND OF ALL WHO HATE US;  
To show mercy toward our fathers,  
And to remember His holy covenant,  
The oath which He swore to Abraham our father,  
To grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our en-  
emies,  
Might serve Him without fear,  
In holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.  
"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most  
High;**

For you will go on BEFORE THE LORD TO PREPARE  
HIS WAYS;

To give the knowledge of salvation to His people  
By the forgiveness of their sins,

Because of the tender mercy of our God,

With which the Sunrise from on high will visit us,

TO SHINE UPON THOSE WHO SIT IN DARKNESS

AND THE SHADOW OF DEATH,

To guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:68-79  
NASB)

Following the introduction, the body of the song consists of two parts: the first speaks of the Messiah, the second of John’s role. In recent weeks we learned that the *Magnificat* is fashioned after Hannah’s song. So too in the *Benedictus* we find multiple allusions, references, and quotations from the Old Testament.

The song begins with the words, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.” This is a song of praise and joy addressed to God in a way that we find often in the O.T. We saw a couple of these references in our call to worship and our Scripture reading (Psalm 41:13; 72:18-19). Paul and Peter also use this form of evoking praise or blessing on God in Ephesians and 1 Peter respectively: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3). To bless God means to endow life on him, to give thanks for his goodness, to recognize him as the source of well-being. Why does Zechariah bless God? The content of the song gives the answer.

Following the introduction there are several repeated words that form a chiasm. I would like us to focus on a few key thoughts centered on these repeated words that give the occasion for Zechariah and for us to bless God.

Come or visit

His people

Salvation

Prophets

Hand of our enemies

Father

Covenant

Oath

Father

Hand of our enemies

Prophets

Salvation

His people

Come or visit

First, God has visited or come to his people. “The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). God didn’t send a representative, an agent, or a diplomat. He came himself. He descended into the fright and fray of humanity. He lowered himself and moved into the neighborhood. He came as a weak, dependent, powerless infant. And God didn’t come to sit on a throne,

or to be a movie star, or to be president. He came to his people, to be with us—Immanuel.

My little grandson is almost two years old and already he is putting words together. My wife Liz, who is known affectionately to Sam as “Ga,” jumps for joy every time she hears his voice. The two of them have quite a relationship. When Sam wants to build a bridge or play with his barn, he will say, “Ga, down.” Liz never responds by saying she first has to clean up, or fix the meal, or do the laundry. She immediately sets aside what she is doing, gets on the floor, and plays with Sam. Of course the house is a mess, but the greater thing is that Sam knows he will get Ga’s full attention. For centuries, God’s people have been crying out and saying, “God, down. Come down and be with us.” This is the prayer that Gabriel tells Zechariah has been answered, and Zechariah blesses God because he has come down to be with his people.

God’s visitation is amplified in verses 78-79. The term sunrise connects to Malachi 4:2, where we read that the “sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.” The writers of the Greek OT used this word to translate a Hebrew word referring to the Messiah—the word “branch” or “shoot” in Jer 23:5 and Zech 3:8; 6:12. The coming of God is like a sunrise that brings light into the darkness, a quote from Isa 60:2. This means that God doesn’t just come for the Jews, even though the song is filled with OT names and ideas—Israel, Abraham, David, holy prophets, fathers, and holy covenant. Isa 60:2 refers to the light that will shine on those who had never heard of or known God. God’s people are those who come to know Jesus as the Messiah.

The metaphor of the sun dispelling darkness provides a great image. It refers to the traveler who has been overtaken by darkness before he reaches his destination. The night is pitch black and the traveler cannot see the path. He is gripped with overwhelming sense of terror. But then a bright light appears to show the way that leads to safety and peace. This happened to my wife and I when we were driving across Nevada one winter. When the darkness set in it began to snow. As it grew darker and the snowfall became heavier we could not see the road ahead. Our headlights could not penetrate the darkness. We were in the middle of nowhere and we grew afraid. Finally, we saw a light, the light of a motel. The light led us to a place of safety and peace, complete with hot water and a television. This is the condition of mankind. We are lost in darkness, blindly groping, stumbling over obstacles, unable to see the way. But the Messiah has come to his people. Like the sun, he shines a bright light that illuminates the path that leads to peace, peace with God.

Second, God has raised up a horn of salvation. Horn of salvation is another common OT phrase. Psalm 18:2 reads:

**The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,  
My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge;  
My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold**

The horn of an animal is the source of its power, its strength. God’s power and strength are concentrated in his anointed, the Messiah who will redeem his people. The weak and powerless baby born to Mary and Joseph is the power of God.

The word salvation appears three times in the song, and again we have amplification of what it means in verses 76-78. The salva-

tion of God is not a political or economic salvation, but salvation from the cancer of sin and death. God could save us from the struggles, disappointments, and heartaches that we all experience, but then another struggle will surface soon enough. God gives us the ultimate salvation: the forgiveness of sins. Zechariah's son John would prepare the way for the anointed by proclaiming this message. And then God's anointed would die on a cross to effect this forgiveness. The debt of our sin is not disregarded, but rather it is poured out on his son. The cross is the power of God, the horn of salvation.

The apostle Paul spoke of the horn of salvation when he said:

**For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (Rom 1:16)**

**For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Cor 1:18)**

Why does God come to save his people from their sins? It is because of his mercy, a word that is repeated twice in the song. The mercy of God is no mere formality. Mercy is deeply rooted in God, and described by the word "tender." This word is often translated compassion. It means the bowels or gut. God's mercy comes from deep within his gut. This is how deeply his heart is moved towards us. This is the deepest truth about God and what we struggle so to understand.

Isaac Watts wrote a certain hymn many years ago. Today we sing, "His heart is made with tenderness/And overflows with love." But these are not Watts's original words. This is what he wrote:

With joy we mediate the grace  
Of our High Priest above,  
His heart was filled with tenderness,  
His bowels yearned for love.

There is a powerful illustration of mercy and forgiveness in the movie "Braveheart." William Wallace secretly marries a village girl, which leads eventually to her death. Wallace carries the blame and guilt of that death. At the burial, he falls to his knees and hangs his head before the girl's father. Without words he is asking for mercy and forgiveness from the one who carried the deepest pain of the loss. The father very slowly moves his trembling hand to touch Wallace's bowed head. This is the character of God—to give mercy to the ones who cause him the deepest pain, the death of his son.

**The LORD is gracious and merciful;  
Slow to anger and great in lovingkindness.  
The LORD is good to all,  
And His mercies are over all His works. (Psa 145:8-9)**

The naming of John is very important in this story because his name means God's grace. Our salvation is totally by God's grace.

Third, God's salvation means freedom from our enemies and freedom to serve him.

Salvation is a salvation from and a salvation to, a salvation with a two-fold purpose. First, there is a rescue from the hand of our enemies. The quote here is from Psalm 106:10, referring

to God's rescue of Israel out of the hands of Egypt. For the Jews in Zechariah's day, the enemy was Rome. In fact, the Jews had been in the grasp of one enemy after another for several centuries. They were looking for a political savior to overthrow the power of Rome and set them free. Some years ago we might have viewed the enemy as communism. In our day we might be looking for a savior to lead us out of economic turmoil.

But the enemy is not Rome or another nation. The enemy isn't visible or physical. The enemies we face are spiritual. Physical enemies can harm our physical body and physical well-being but they can't harm our soul. But spiritual enemies can, and thus they are the more deadly. The problem isn't the economy, but greed. The problem isn't just war, it is the lust for power. Spiritual enemies are the powers of darkness, the deceptions of evil, the enticements of sin. The world is full of evil. The enemy is Satan himself who is a murderer and a liar. He is a monster who seeks to destroy our life, our joy, and our peace. The powers of darkness seek to lay their hands upon us and hold us in their grasp, enslaving us to fear and death, addiction and sin, depraved minds, and lust-saturated lives. These enemies are lurking around every corner. They are powerful and deceptive. Zechariah sings God's blessings because God is the one who delivers us from the hand of our enemies.

But we are not just saved "from" but "for" a purpose. A criminal goes to jail for the crime he has committed, but when he is released from prison, he isn't set free to go back to a life of crime. He is released with a change of heart to be a contributor to society. As God's people we are rescued, released to serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness. The word for "serve" is deeply tied to the idea of cultic worship in the OT. So Paul uses this word in his exhortation to the Romans "to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship." The goal is "worshipping service." This is exactly what Zechariah is saying. We are saved so that our life, all of our life, is a reflection of worshipping and serving God, because our life is empowered through the Spirit to be sacred. Everything we do counts for the glory of God.

Fourth, God has been faithful to his covenant promises spoken to the fathers and holy prophets.

Zechariah's name means "God remembers." Elizabeth's name means "God's oath." This is the center of the song: God's faithfulness to his covenant word, God following through on the oath he has sworn. We could spend hours reciting verses in the OT that speak of what God has promised for his people. It began with God's promise to Abraham:

**And I will make you a great nation,  
And I will bless you,  
And make your name great;  
And so you shall be a blessing;  
And I will bless those who bless you,  
And the one who curses you I will curse.  
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."  
(Gen 12:2-3)**

God promised that a seed would come through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The prophets spoke of a day that would come, a light that would shine, enemies that would be defeated, a prophet

greater than Moses, a king greater than David. God's goodness is not seen in what happens or doesn't happen to us. His goodness is seen in his faithfulness to his covenant keeping word. Zechariah blesses God because what he has promised has come to pass.

When I went away to college I took with me the oldest family vehicle, a Chevrolet Corvair. I doubt that there are many people here who are old enough to remember the Corvair, a car that constantly leaked oil out the rear end and left a puff a smoke wherever it went. My dad had told me that he would buy me a car some day, but I wasn't holding my breath. Then one night we visited the car dealer. We looked at several used cars and kicked a few tires. He went in to negotiate while I waited outside. After he came out we waited until we heard over the loudspeaker, "Will Ralph Hanneman please come to the office?" When my father came out he was holding the bill of sale to a 1968 Pontiac "400" Firebird—metallic blue with a white vinyl top. That car instantly transformed my life. I still have the bill of sale to this day, and I bless my father because he was a man of his word.

One of the things I admire most is the quality of people being faithful to their word, a quality that is growing more and more rare in our day. People continually change their minds and their plans without hesitation. But God is faithful to his word.

God has come to save and deliver according to his promise. It was an expected but unannounced arrival. God will come again, and Advent keeps us in anticipation of that day. God has kept his word in the past and he will keep it in the future. Every day we anticipate the unannounced arrival of God in our lives. Like the sun shining with healing in its wings, God continues to come to his people. He comes to save and to deliver because of his mercy and compassion and his desire for us to live as he created us to be, living worshipful lives to his glory.

**Save us, O LORD our God,  
And gather us from among the nations,  
To give thanks to Your holy name  
And glory in Your praise.**

**Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,  
From everlasting even to everlasting.  
And let all the people say, "Amen."  
Praise the LORD! (Psa 106:47-48)**

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