

# WHEN GOD COMES DOWN

SERIES: THE GREAT REVERSAL (ADVENT 2023)

Luke 1:67-79

Second Message

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Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and the comfort of your holy Word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

This collect for today, the second Sunday of Advent, is one of my favorite prayers in the Prayerbook. Archbishop Cranmer assigned it to the second Sunday of the Church Year to inspire us for the entire year. As we encounter the Scriptures throughout the year, may we hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them. God has caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, both Old and New Testaments. This seems a particularly appropriate reminder at Advent, a season when we look back to God's promises in the Old Testament and look ahead in anticipation to the fulfillment of these promises in the New Testament, beginning with the advent of Jesus. But not all of the promises have yet been fulfilled: we look ahead to a second advent of Jesus. Meanwhile, hearing the Scriptures should instill in us both patience and comfort as we hold fast to our blessed hope—hope that is anchored in Christ's first advent and that anticipates his second.

In our Advent series this year we are looking at the Lukan canticles, the four songs that punctuate Luke's infancy narrative. Today we come to the second song, Zechariah's Benedictus.

Luke has skillfully composed his infancy narrative, interleaving the accounts of John the Baptist and Jesus: two annunciations, two births, two circumcisions, two namings. He begins with the angel Gabriel's annunciation, first to Zechariah that his barren wife will conceive and bear a son, then to virgin Mary that she will conceive and bear a son. Later, he describes the birth of John followed by the birth of Jesus. In between the two annunciations and the two births the two expectant mothers come together as Mary hurries from Nazareth to visit Elizabeth in the hill country of Judah.

Last week Brian focused on the first half of the Jesus side of the narrative. Today we focus on the entire John the Baptist side, both annunciation and birth.

Zechariah was a priest, and his wife was also from a priestly family. They are described as "righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" (Luke 1:6 ESV). These were faithful Jews, godly people doing everything right. But despite their devout faithfulness, they had no child, for Elizabeth was barren, and both were old. In their society this would have brought great shame, embarrassment, and reproach.

As a priest, twice a year Zechariah would go up to Jerusalem to serve in the temple for a week. One day he was chosen to enter the temple to burn incense on the golden altar that stood in front of the veil beyond which was the Holy of Holies. This was a once-in-a-lifetime event; many priests never got this honor. The incense he offered up inside represented the prayers of the people who were

praying outside.

What were they praying? Perhaps the words of our call to worship from Psalm 80, with its three-fold refrain:

**Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!**

You maybe noticed the escalating address of this petition: O God; O God of Hosts; O LORD God of Hosts (Ps 80:3, 7, 19).

Perhaps they prayed words of our Scripture reading from Isaiah:

**Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down...**

**to make your name known to your adversaries...**

**Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;**

**in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? (Isa 64:1-7)**

The barrenness of Zechariah and Elizabeth mirrored the barrenness of the people, subject to their adversaries, the occupying Romans.

But lo! The angel Gabriel suddenly standing beside the altar! He had surprising news: "your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John... he will go before...to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (1:17).

Unsurprisingly, Zechariah asked, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years" (1:18). Gabriel took these words as unbelief, because there was precedent in the birth of Isaac to aged Abraham and barren Sarah. How would Zechariah know? By being struck dumb until the promise be fulfilled. Finally he emerged from the temple to the wondering, waiting people. This was the greatest day of his life, but he had been rendered speechless.

At the end of the week he went home. Elizabeth indeed conceived, and for five months kept herself hidden at home. This completes the annunciation portion of John's story.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel appeared again, this time to a young virgin in Nazareth, betrothed but not yet married. She too would conceive and bear a son, to be called Jesus. "How so?" she asked. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (1:35). And so her womb became the container of the uncontainable God, God contracted to a span. Her womb hosted God!

Gabriel had more surprising news: "your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren" (1:36). So Mary hurried to the home of Elizabeth in the hill country of Judah, where she stayed three months. At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's baby leaped in her womb. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and said, "why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (1:43). Hospitality all around! The Lord was hosted in Mary's womb, now hosted in Elizabeth's house, where she hosted in her womb the

one who would prepare the way. The baby in her womb recognized the presence of the one whose way he would prepare.

Mary responded with the Magnificat, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Brian took us through this last week. For three months these two expectant mothers were together, one old, one very young. Then Mary returned home shortly before Elizabeth’s due date.

Elizabeth gave birth to a son, to the great surprise and delight of her neighbors who rejoiced with her. It seems she has kept herself hidden for all nine months. On the eighth day, according to the Lord’s commandment to Abraham long ago, it was time to circumcise the baby boy, a sign of his membership in God’s covenant people. “They”—the neighbors and relatives—had already decided his name was Zechariah, and were calling him after his father. “No!” said Elizabeth most emphatically: “he shall be called John!” (1:60). They objected that there was no precedent for such a name.

Now at last Zechariah enters the picture. He’s been absent from the narrative for nine months. By means of a writing tablet he backs up Elizabeth: “His name is John” (1:63). Thereby he fulfills Gabriel’s word. Immediately—one of Luke’s distinctive words. Immediately, his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, God being the implied actor. At last he could speak, and he blessed God. News spread far and wide, and everyone was asking, “What then will this child be?” (1:66).

Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, who is so active throughout this infancy narrative. Spirit-empowered, he prophesied, that is he proclaimed God’s word. He gave the divine perspective on what was happening, including the question, “What then will this child be?”

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.” In Latin, *Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel*. Since the Western church has recited and sung this in Latin for over 1500 years, it is known by its opening word, *Benedictus*. As one of the Lukan canticles, we should hear it sung: Michael Perry’s hymn *Blest be the God of Israel*, based on Zechariah’s song.<sup>2</sup>

Zechariah’s song is in two stanzas. The first stanza (68-75) is one very long sentence, which ESV preserves. This first stanza focuses on what God is doing. First, Zechariah proclaims why God is to be praised:

**“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has visited and redeemed his people  
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David,  
as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.  
(1:68-70 ESV)**

God has done three things: he has *visited* and has *redeemed* his people, and has *raised up* a horn of salvation for us.

God has visited his people. Earlier we had the so-called Visitation scene, when Mary hurried from Nazareth to see her relative Elizabeth in Judea, staying for three months. That’s a beautiful scene, but it’s not a biblical visitation, in which a superior takes action with those under his authority to arrange or put things right.

I have a vivid illustration of this sort of visitation from my own experience. Forty years ago I worked at CERN, the particle accelerator lab that straddles the Swiss-French border at Geneva. I crossed the border several times a day, often on my bicycle. One time I got embroiled in a dispute with French customs over my bike. It had already consumed two days, and on the third morning I reported to the customs post to again try to resolve the issue. The post was swarming with an unusually large number of uniformed

officials. Entering the building, I saw why: there was one man not in a uniform. A suit had come from head office. One of the officials began to explain my supposed infraction. Before long the suit interrupted and said that I was in the right; that my supposed infraction was actually legally-required by the Swiss authorities. He vindicated me and thwarted my adversary. Every time I encounter the word *visit* in the Bible I think back to that event.

When God visits, he intervenes to vindicate those in the right and punish those in the wrong. Isaiah had cried out, “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down” (Isa 64:1). God has come down to his people!

The next verb clarifies what he has done in his visitation: he has accomplished redemption for his people, delivering them from their enemies into safety. He is setting them free.

The third verb further clarifies, specifying the agent: he “has raised up a horn of salvation for us.” Horn is a potent image of power—think of a bull’s horn. Here it is power that accomplishes salvation. This powerful agent rises from the line of David. And this is in accordance with God’s promises through his prophets from long ago. This can be none other than the long-awaited Davidic Messiah. Is the season of advent, of waiting, almost over? “O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here.” Is her exile almost over?

Next Zechariah describes the purpose of this divine visitation through the agency of the Messiah:

**that we should be saved from our enemies  
and from the hand of all who hate us. (1:71)**

Yes, that we should be saved from the Romans, our wicked oppressors! Yes, just as long ago we were saved from the Egyptians, who held us in harsh servitude—as we remember each year in Passover. Yes, just as we were saved from the Greek Syrians, who attempted cultural genocide to wipe out Jewishness—as we remember each year in Hanukkah; as Jews worldwide are doing now on this the third day of Hanukkah. Yes, saved from the hand of all who hate us: just as Israel is seeking to do with Hamas as it pounds Gaza. Israel’s celebration of Hanukkah is a somber one this year. It is easy to read this verse as the militaristic language of national redemption.

Next, Zechariah gives the basis for God’s action:

**to show the mercy promised to our fathers  
and to remember his holy covenant,  
the oath that he swore to our father Abraham. (1:72-73)**

The basis for God’s action is his faithfulness to his promises. God will do what he said. He shows mercy by remembering his covenant. God’s intervention does not depend on the faithfulness of his people; indeed, they have been unfaithful. God’s intervention depends on his own faithfulness. When he makes a promise he will act to fulfill that promise. He will be true to his word. This is what God’s righteousness is: he does what he says he will do. Long ago he made a promise to Abraham, that he would have a son who would grow into a mighty people whom God would take for himself as his people.

The first stanza climaxes with the purpose of God’s visitation:

**...to grant us  
that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear,  
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.  
(1:74-75)**

God saves his people so that they might serve him. This is why God liberated his people from slavery in Egypt. Moses confronted Pharaoh in God's name: "Let my people go, that they may worship me." In both Hebrew and Greek the word can be translated as *worship* or *serve*.

Serving the Lord is a full-time occupation. Israel served or worshiped God in the cult, centered around the tabernacle and later the temple—the things that Zechariah did during his service in the temple. Israel also served the Lord by keeping his commandments, by living in holiness and righteousness. He gave them the Torah, the gift of order, to show how to live well-ordered lives. Living ethical lives well-pleasing to him was part of their service to the Lord. This was in accordance with what God had appointed the first human to do in the garden: to worship and to keep the one commandment. In such service is perfect freedom.

In the first stanza, God liberates his people so that we might serve him, whose service is perfect freedom. So that we might live lives of ethical integrity, oriented onto the Lord in praise.

In the second stanza (76-79), Zechariah now looks at his infant son and describes his role:

**And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
in the forgiveness of their sins. (1:75-76)**

John will go before the Lord to prepare the way—in fulfillment of Malachi: "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me" (Mal 3:1). And in fulfillment of Isaiah: "A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord" (Isa 40:3). And in fulfillment of Gabriel's word (1:17).

He will give knowledge of salvation. Earlier, salvation had been defined as deliverance from our enemies, from those that hate us. Here, salvation is in the forgiveness of sins. This is what is really needed: not deliverance from physical enemies, but release from sin. In Israel's system of worship there were ways of dealing with unintentional sin and with various impurities. But there was no way of dealing with intentional, deliberate sin. What is required is forgiveness, forgiving that which is inexcusable. Zechariah recognizes that his son John will usher in the age of forgiveness.

Again, just as in the first stanza, Zechariah tells us God's motivation and purpose:

**because of the tender mercy of our God,  
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow  
of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace." (1:78-79)**

In the first stanza we saw that the basis for God's action was his faithfulness to his promises, that is, his righteousness. He made a promise to Abraham and he is acting to fulfill it. Here, what is motivating God is his tender mercy. More literally, it is his "bowels of compassion." From the depths of his being wells up compassion. God revealed himself to Moses as "a God merciful and gracious" (Exod 34:6). I fear that many people don't think about God this way.

Motivated from the deep compassion in the depths of his being, God is sending help: "the sunrise shall visit us from on high." The noun refers to something rising up, whether a shoot, or a star, or, as here, the sun after a night of darkness. Again we have the word *visit*. This rising sun shall come from on high. Earlier in this chapter Gabriel has described God as "the Most High," and the Jesus-to-be-

born as "the Son of the Most High" (1:32, 35). This sunrise is the long-awaited Davidic Messiah. Its arrival shall be God's visitation to earth to put things right.

This rising sun has two purposes: to *enlighten* and to *guide*. After a prolonged period of darkness the light is about to shine. Those living in darkness will be able to see, and will be guided into the way of peace, of *shalom*, of flourishing. Representing the light that is coming, we have on our advent wreath four candles for this season of anticipation. At the end of the waiting we will light the central candle, the Christ candle. The light has come into the dark world!

This song of Zechariah is a remarkable song. It is packed full of biblical theology. In here we have the call of Abraham, the promise that God made to give him a seed, both son and people. In here we have the purpose of the Exodus: liberation from enemies so that we might serve the Lord. In here we have his promise to David to raise up a son. Zechariah recognizes that all this is coming to fulfillment in what he has just witnessed: the birth, circumcision, and naming of his son John; and the one who is hosted in Mary's womb, who has just spent three months in his house. So much theology is packed into this one song!

The next thirty years of John's life are summarized in the final sentence of the chapter:

**And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. (1:80)**

Thirty years later the word of God came to John, and he went around "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." He was fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord'" (3:2-4). John the forerunner pointed to Jesus: "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (3:16). In art John is often so portrayed, pointing to Christ, whose way he prepared: John Prodromos, John the Forerunner. Pointing away from himself to Jesus.

But who would receive this message of God's visitation in Jesus? Who would receive this call to come and find forgiveness of sins? Luke repeatedly shows that it is the most unlikely people: the last, the least, the lost.

For example, the woman with the alabaster flask. Jesus had been invited to the home of Simon the Pharisee. Simon snubbed him by not showing the standard marks of hospitality. But when a sinful woman heard that Jesus was in the house, she came in and did all that Simon had failed to do. She wet his feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with ointment. Jesus said to Simon: "her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." And to the woman he said, "Your sins are forgiven...Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (7:47-50). Be guided in the way of *shalom*.

To the hemorrhaging woman who reached out to touch the fringe of his garment he said the same thing, though translated differently: "Daughter, your faith has made you well [saved you]; go in peace" (8:48). Be guided in the way of *shalom*.

These little people oriented themselves onto Jesus. They extended to him the hospitality of faith, of believing in him. He extended to them the hospitality of attention. He noticed them, embraced their faith, and pronounced forgiveness. But many did not respond to him this way.

At the end of his long journey to Jerusalem, Jesus came over the

Mount of Olives and saw the city. It's a dramatic sight still today. But Jesus didn't admire the view. Instead, he wept over the city:

**"Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! ...your enemies will...tear you down to the ground ...because you did not know the time of your visitation."** (19:41-44)

Jerusalem did not know the way of peace, and rejected the divine visitation. Instead, it handed Jesus over to the occupying power to be put to death. The disciples were devastated. The two on the Emmaus Road said to their unrecognized companion, "we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (24:21).

Fifty days later, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit came powerfully upon the disciples. Peter preached his first sermon, challenging the crowd:

**"Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it."** (Acts 2:22-24)

Then he said a most surprising thing:

**"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."** (2:38-39)

He offered forgiveness of sins for this most unspeakable of sins: putting to death the one whom God had sent in visitation to bring salvation. Not salvation from physical enemies, but forgiveness of sins. The real enemies are sin, death, and the unseen demonic powers opposed to God.

The church grew, and then Gentiles found forgiveness as well. The Jewish believers were not expecting this. So eventually the leaders in Jerusalem called a council to discuss the matter. Peter, Barnabas, and Paul recounted what God was doing among the Gentiles. Then James, leader of the church in Jerusalem replied, "Simeon has related how God first *visited* the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his

name" (Acts 15:14). God has visited *them*, the enemy, even a Roman centurion. Those who were formerly enemies of one another are both embraced by the hospitality of a God who forgives sins. They, in turn, learn how to forgive one another, as God has forgiven them—as God has forgiven us. So forgiven, we learn to love our enemies.

Per ancient tradition, Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in Ein Kerem, now in the western suburbs of Jerusalem, but still a distinct village. Last May, after sending the Israel tour party home, Sue and I went there. First we went to the Church of the Visitation. In the courtyard, alongside a lovely statue of Mary greeting Elizabeth, were many plaques on the wall, each containing the *Magnificat* in Greek, in Latin, in Hebrew, and in many other languages. Next we went to the nearby Church of John the Baptist. Here, too, were plaques of the *Benedictus* in many languages.

Mary's *Magnificat* and Zechariah's *Benedictus* are very Jewish songs. They are rooted in Israel's Scriptures: in the promise to Abraham, in the Exodus from Egypt, in the promise to David. They are rooted in this language of God visiting his people. But God has visited even the Gentiles. So now these songs are sung all over the world in many different languages. God has visited his people. He has liberated us so that we might serve him, whose service is perfect freedom. My soul magnifies the Lord. Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.

Lord God, the light of the minds that know you, the life of the souls that love you, and the strength of the hearts that serve you: Help us...so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord... *Amen*.<sup>3</sup>

1. Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent, *The Book of Common Prayer* (ACNA 2019).

2. Michael Perry, *Blest Be the God of Israel* (1973).

3. Collect for the Feast of Augustine of Hippo, August 28, *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*.