

The First Song of Christmas: 2. Zechariah's Song

Luke 1:66-79

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The songs of Christmas: this would not be the season that it is, without music. Each year, I look forward to the music as long as it doesn't begin much before Thanksgiving. Somehow it feels wrong to walk into a store in the middle of September and see the decorations and hear the music – of Christmas. And now everywhere we go, there is the music. It moves us, inspires us, cheers us, brings forth memories, and even calls from within us what we may not have known was deep inside. (Turn to the person next to you and mention the first song of Christmas that comes to mind.) Is there anyone who could not think of a song? We know the songs, and yet not every song offers the same message. My sister and her family are living in China while her husband teaches at one of the universities there. She writes that religious expression is discouraged by the Chinese government but that does not stop the celebration of Christmas – because for many in this world there is nothing religious about Christmas! I've noticed this in the catalogs that have been arriving in our mailbox. Here's one. [scene with Santa and the words "we believe"] The words "We believe" caught my attention. What's the message here? What do we believe? Here's another catalog cover [also with the word "believe" and Santa] Again, the word "believe". The stores are not doing something wrong. I understand their interest is in turning a profit by the end of December. And if we enjoy the secular music of the season, that's not wrong. It's just increasingly hard to hear the true song of Christmas. What do you think is God's favorite song of Christmas? Carrie introduced us to that song last Sunday. It is the song of salvation. Can you hear it? Do you hear what I hear, this morning? Most people cannot or have not yet. God knows everyone needs the song. It was Zechariah's song, but before we get to Zechariah's song, let's learn about what prompted the song.

Turn with me to the first chapter of Luke. Luke begins the story in verse five: *In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.* What Luke wants us to know is that this was a dark and gloomy period in the life of the nation of Israel. Remember, this was not just any nation – but the nation chosen by God to be the light to all other nations. But at the time of Zechariah, Israel was under the rule of the pagan empire of Rome who had installed a puppet king named Herod. Herod tried to give the public appearance of being a Jew. He instigated a massive building program that included rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. But he accomplished this by conscripting people to provide the labor and issuing heavy taxes. Herod was ruthless and brutal. He lived a decadent lifestyle also funded through taxation. He jealously guarded his position, executing anyone who appeared to be a threat to his authority including members of his own family – two of his sons and his wife. And as we will hear in a few weeks, even ordering the massacre of infants around Bethlehem. In the midst of these dark times, Luke introduces us to an elderly priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth – in case there is any question about their heritage, they are both descendants of Aaron. The name Zechariah means "God remembers", and the name Elizabeth means "promise of God". These were not just names but the hope of the people. When Zechariah and Elizabeth were married, imagine how joyful their families felt. Their union announced "God remembers God's promise." But as the years passed, the truth of those words faded. Elizabeth was unable to bear a child. And now this couple was well past childbearing ages in a culture where childless women were mocked.

At that time, there were approximately 20,000 descendants of Aaron, all of them priests by birth, like Zechariah. Since there were so many priests and only one Temple, they were divided into groups and those groups served in the Temple only two weeks in a year with various duties

allotted to each priest. The greatest privilege granted to a priest – the thing they each lived for – was the privilege of burning incense on the altar of the Holy Place. This privilege was granted by casting lots – similar to throwing dice today. Most priests never got the chance and if they did, they were allowed only once in their entire life. For Zechariah, this was a chance of a lifetime. But this was no coincidence – I’m not sure there are coincidences – only God instances if we are ready. Zechariah was expected to offer prayers of intercession on behalf of the people of Israel and then put spices on the coals of the altar as a powerful symbol of the prayers rising to God. And while that happened, outside in the courtyard, people were waiting laying face down on the floor in prayer, praying with the priest who was representing them in the Holy Place.

Who could be prepared for what happened next? Zechariah was not. In the midst of his prayer, an angel of the God appeared and stood as one end of the altar right in front of the priest. This was not part of the Zechariah has been told before he entered the Holy Place. There had been no word from God since the prophet Malachi 400 years earlier. Understandably, Zechariah was afraid. But the angel said, “Your prayer has been heard.” What prayer? Not for children, Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up on that a long time ago. That was no longer physically possible. Zechariah was probably praying for the Messiah – for God to keep God’s promise to Israel. But God’s answer addressed both prayers – the unspoken prayer of Zechariah’s past and the prayer that he had just spoken. Elizabeth would bare a son and this child would not be an ordinary child but would be named John and would fulfill the prophecy of Malachi. John would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. This was too much for Zechariah. How do you believe this? And he did not. “How is this possible? My wife and I are too old.” Zechariah made the mistake of looking at God through his problems rather than looking at his problems through the power of God. And the angel replied: “To prove to you that this is God’s truth, you will be unable to speak a single word – you will not utter a sound until the day John is born.” Zechariah completed his two weeks, returned home and Elizabeth conceived and 9 months later the baby was born and on the eighth day, the baby was circumcised which was when the child was given a name. The common practice was for a son to be named after his father. But Elizabeth said, his name is John. The neighbors and relatives that had gathered knew this could not be right. What’s his name Zechariah? And Zechariah motioned for a writing tablet and wrote: His name is John. And at that moment after nine months of total silence, God’s truth is undeniable and Zechariah can speak. And what comes forth from Zechariah is a song – the song of salvation. God remembers God’s promise. God has been faithful in the past. God remains faithful. And then in verse 76, Zechariah sings about his son: *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,* John would be a prophet who would go before Jesus, the Lord, the Messiah. And in verses 77 and 79 – the message of salvation: *to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ...to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.*

I’ve been reading Richard Stearns’ book, *The Hole in our Gospel*. He is the CEO of World Vision. He describes how he struggled with taking this role of CEO of what is the largest Christian humanitarian organization in the world. When he was in his 30s, Rich was a successful CEO with Parker’s Brothers and then Lennox China. He made a seven figure income, lived in a ten bedroom home on five acres, his children attended a private Christian school. Life was good. He was active in his church and kept a Bible on his desk and used it to guide his actions as a CEO. One day one of his friends who happened to work for World Vision told him the organization had lost its CEO and while praying about that he felt God was saying Rich would be the new CEO. Rich replied that God had not told him that. That could not possibly be God’s plan. He knew very little about World Vision and was happy where he was. A few months later another friend saw an ad in the Wall Street Journal for a new CEO at World

Vision. It happened to be the only day the ad ran in the Wall Street Journal. His friend sent Rich a copy of the ad with a note that said I thought of you when I saw this. Rich thought this was hilarious. No way would he be interested. A few weeks later, a head hunter called and asked if Rich would consider applying for the position. Rich laughed at the idea and asked if his friend was behind this and the head hunter replied that he had never even heard of Rich's friend. Finally a board member of World Vision contacted Rich – and Rich told him that he was not interested. And the board member said: "Are you saying you are not open to God's will for your life?" Ouch! Well yes, Rich wanted to be open to God's will but – and he had a long list of reasons and he was sure World Vision was not God's will for his life. But the question stayed with him: Are you willing to be open to God's will for your life? So he finally agreed to apply. Several months passed and he was asked to interview. At the interview he was told he would be expected to travel to some of the worst places in the world and see children in the worst conditions possible. Can you handle that? And Rich said, "No! I'm terrified at the thought. I break down and cry at Disney movies. I'm the wrong guy for this." The next morning, he was offered the job. After a few months of avoiding an answer, he finally gave up. He took a 75% pay cut, moved his family from New England to Seattle, and began traveling to third world countries. And in the rest of the book, he describes what it is like to visit places in this world where children have only unsafe water to drink and are dying of dysentery. He describes going to places where young children are given guns and forced to be soldiers. He describes going into villages where children are raising children because all of the adults have been wiped out as a result of AIDS.

And Rich says it broke him. He realized there was a hole in his gospel. He was raised with a Christian faith that was like fire insurance. If I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior I would not burn in Hell but I would go to heaven. I knew Jesus loved me and knew my purpose in this world was to love Jesus – and then I looked at these children and I thought surely God must love them. And the people who could change their world were Christians like him, and he had not even been paying attention. He turned to Ephesians 2:8-9 (read) and he believed that. He said, I just failed to read the next verse: We are saved by faith for good works. I missed that.

And that's Zechariah's song: knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of my sins, to shine on those living in darkness, and to guide my feet in the path of peace. And I think this is a congregation that gets that. Every week, there are persons knowing they are saved by faith and get involved in acts of service. Last weekend, there were 21 who helped to package gifts for children in third world countries through Operation Christmas Child. Last night there were at least as many doing the same. Peter Larson sleeping outside every night and many of you are coming alongside him also sleeping outside or giving to help people in this community. I got an invitation from one of our members who is having a Christmas party to raise fund for Light of Hope School in Kenya. Many of you are doing things I know nothing about but the knowledge of your own salvation bringing light into darkness and walking in the path of peace.

Some of us remember these signs. (sign for bomb shelter) One was posted outside the cafeteria in my elementary school. At the height of the Cold War, we practiced getting under our desks and how to get to the fallout shelter if our small town was bombed. In October 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis had much of this country in fear. As Noel Regney was walking in New York City, he noticed a mother who was pushing her baby in a stroller. In the face of such enormous, life threatening problems, he saw a quiet message in a baby. Do you see what I see I see? He wrote. Do you hear what I hear? Do you know what I know? Listen for the Song of Christmas, salvation's song: the child, the child sleeping in the night. He will bring us goodness and light.

Study Guide

Monday Read Luke 1:57-80

Each Christmas season, the air is full of songs. The world at large was not that way during the season just before Jesus' birth—but for those in whose lives God was at work, it was different. Here Zechariah, John the Baptist's elderly father, is filled with the Holy Spirit and exults in the coming of a Savior.

- Luke says when people in the Judean hill country heard of the events surrounding John's birth, they asked, "What will this child turn out to be?" His father knew, as verse 76 shows. Who played John's role in your life—who prepared the way for your faith, and introduced you to Jesus?
- How did Zechariah describe the Savior's mission? What echoes do you hear in Zechariah's words of the Servant Songs in Isaiah? Are there corners of your life that still need the sunshine and peace of Christ's presence this Christmas?

Tuesday Read Isaiah 42:1-4

New Testament Christians read the "Servant Songs" in Isaiah, of which this is the first, and felt a strong inner sense of recognition. These words made them think of Jesus! So this week, we will read all four of the Servant Songs, and reflect on what they tell us about the child born to be our Savior.

- Isaiah is insistent that the servant has a God-given mission to bring justice to the earth. How does God's concern for justice speak to your heart? How are you seeking to live in God's spirit of justice?
- God's servant will not, however, seek justice in the ways we often think of — he will not raise his voice or use tactics that would break even a bruised reed. How do these words call the life of Jesus to mind? What do they teach us about how we go about carrying out Jesus' mission today?

Wednesday Read Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Concepts and language from this, the culminating Servant song in Isaiah, are found throughout the New Testament. No passage in the Hebrew Scriptures spoke more eloquently to those early Christians — and to every generation of Christians since — about the meaning of Jesus' death.

- In verses 4-6, we read that a pure, innocent person bore the burden of our waywardness and sin. Where in your life can you recognize your own tendency to wander from God's way? Take a moment now to thank Jesus for his willingness to bear the burden of your brokenness.
- Verses 10-12 of today's reading take us beyond suffering to tell us what made it worthwhile. Have you claimed your place as one of Jesus' spiritual offspring? Do you believe that your love and trust in Jesus is important to him?

Thursday Read Isaiah 49:1-6

In this second prophetic message, God promises to make his people a light to the world, so that God's love and salvation can reach the whole earth.

- Just gathering the scattered exiles of Israel isn't enough, God says — I want to reach the whole earth. Is there a significant cause (perhaps one that feels way too big to you) that you sense God calling you to be involved in? If so, are you responding in faith or in fear?
- How are you nurturing the light of God's presence in you? In what ways are you submitting your life to God's direction and what spiritual practices have you adopted for the purpose of making yourself more available to God?

Friday Read Isaiah 50:4-9

In this Servant Song, as in the others, we have read this week, those who knew Jesus and followed him during his earthly ministry saw a picture of their beloved Savior, who willingly faced suffering and tirelessly ministered to others.

- Think of one person who has been Christ's physical presence for you — who has sustained you at a time in your life when you were weary. Is there someone for whom you can be Christ's physical presence this Christmas season to sustain them?
- This song is infused with an atmosphere of confidence and hope, even in the face of difficulty. As we near the end of a year that has brought many kinds of challenges, in what (or in whom) do you place your greatest hope for the future?

Saturday Read Luke 3:1-6

We began the week with Zechariah's Song when his son John was born. Today's scripture introduces us to John and his public ministry. Read Matthew 3:1-6 where we learn about the clothing John wore and the food he ate. It is likely intentional that John adopted the same clothing we read that Elijah wore. John quotes from Isaiah "prepare the way for the Lord."

- Why would people have gone out to John to be baptized? What must their sense of their own sin have been? What kind of sins would they have struggled with? Their willingness to be baptized (a radical sign of public desire for cleansing in that day) said something about their hearts.
- What does John's message mean for you as you prepare for Christmas? Consider your own baptism and all that it means as you spend time in prayer today.