

Sermon Advent 1 Midweek 2021

December 1, 2021

Luke 1:67-80

In the Name T of Jesus. Amen.

As we begin meditating on the “hymns” of Advent this year, the Benedictus, the Magnificat, and the Gloria, tonight we start with the Benedictus. Now, if you look in the Gospel of Luke, where all three of these are found in the Bible, you would notice that the Magnificat comes first. That’s the song that Mary sings when the angel Gabriel announces to her that she will give birth to the Savior. I could have done that first, but I chose the Benedictus, because there’s a way where that fits the flow of Advent. The Gloria is at the birth of Jesus, the Magnificat with Mary and the conception, and the Benedictus, which you can see has this eschatological nature about it as it connects to John the Baptist.

As I say that, then, to start, we heard only the immediate verse that this hymn was spoken by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, so it’s good to give this a bit of context. You might not remember the story about John’s birth. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were an old and childless couple who were of the tribe of Levi. This meant they were of the priestly tribe. This is important, in particular for Zechariah. You see, the story of John starts when the lots were cast for it to be Zechariah’s turn to enter into the Holy Place in the Temple. If you know the construction of the Temple, then you know that this meant that Zechariah was now chosen to go past the main altar in the Temple Court and to go into the Holy Place right in front of the curtain behind which was the Holy of Holies—the room where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. So, what Zechariah was to do was to offer incense and the prayers of the Israelites at a smaller altar right in front of that curtain. This was the priest’s job to come before God and pray for His people that He would remember them and bless them.

Well, when Zechariah went into the Temple, something unusual happened. The Angel Gabriel appeared and revealed to him that he was to have a son. Zechariah, understandably, was dubious of this because of his and his wife’s age. However, because of this doubt, Zechariah was made mute until the birth of the son. Luke tells when the son was born, Zechariah wrote on a tablet that he would be named John. His tongue was then loosed and he spoke blessing God. The next thing we hear from Zechariah is the song we heard tonight, the Benedictus.

And as we meditate on that song, what do we see it’s about? Well, we see that it finishes with these words about John: **“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, 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.”

There we hear about John and his work. We hear that he will “go before the Lord to prepare His ways.” And we know that about John, right? We hear that every year at this time. There is this preaching from John that the Kingdom of God is at hand, and so we need to repent, right? We know that. He describes how the axe is laid at the root and there is the need for fruit in keeping with repentance to be born by people lest their tree be chopped down. And what’s the point of that?

The call to repentance brings to the realization of the people that there is sin with dire consequences and if the path of those consequences is not changed the final end will be hell. John doesn’t soft-pedal this, does he? And what’s that do? It creates the realization of sin so that when the Lord comes, His message of salvation will be received in the knowledge of how deeply it is needed. As we as Lutherans say, there is this Law and condemnation preached to prepare the heart for the hearing of the Gospel, of salvation, and forgiveness.

So that’s the portion spoke to John, but what’s the rest really about? It’s about this promise of Jesus, isn’t it? What makes John important? Not he in his own person, but his office of the Elijah, the voice in the wilderness, paving the way for the Lord. Instead of John, as truly ought always be the case, the focus is on Jesus.

And look at how Zechariah brings all of this together around Jesus. He speaks of this all in light of what? What the Father **“spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.”** What’s that saying? It’s saying that as Zechariah is blessed to have been visited by the angel in the Temple, and as he witnessed the birth of this child, he sees that he is an eyewitness to the fulfillment of all of the promises that God has made from of old, the promises He made to His people in what we call the Old Testament. And this all started with a covenant: **“to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham.”**

Do you recall that? The story of Abraham? I think Zechariah could probably relate to Abraham. They’re sort of a mirror of each other, in a sense. You see, the Lord came to Abraham and made this covenant with him. He called him out of the land in which he had been born. He took him to the land that became the Promised Land for the Israelites, the land they inhabited after they had gone through the Exodus, the time in the Wilderness, and took possession of as they passed through the waters of the Jordan at the leading of Joshua just after the death of Moses. That’s where Abraham was, the Lord promising Abraham that land would be given them centuries before it was. But He

made another promise to Abraham. He promised that there would be this blessing from Abraham to the whole world, that through Abraham's offspring the nations of the world would be blessed, and Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. And in Genesis 15 you see this covenant enacted. The Lord told Abraham to bring a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon. He then told him to cut the larger animals in half. And this was common with a covenant. You see in the Hebrew, you wouldn't just make a covenant, you "cut" a covenant. The animals would be cut in half and the people vowing to keep this agreement would walk between the halves, implying "so also to me if I break this." So, after Abraham did this, he was put in a deep sleep. As Abraham awoke, he saw there amidst the animals that had been offered a smoking firepot and a torch passing through the animals. The Lord was vowing this promise to Abraham about his offspring blessing the whole world.

Of course, Abraham obviously got antsy about this offspring coming—if you know the story that's where Ishmael, his son with the servant Hagar comes from. But eventually, Isaac is born. Born when Sarah, Abraham's wife is too old—and that's why I say Zechariah mirrors Abraham. He and Elizabeth were too old to have kids, but the Lord was able to work this miracle. And in doing so was bringing about the fulfillment of this covenant.

But what was the goal of this covenant? Was it John himself? Well, I'm assuming you all know it's not. It's Jesus. But look at how it's worded here. **"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.... that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers."**

It's here that we see the beauty of this fulfillment in this song, isn't it? This covenant that was promised to Abraham is fulfilled. It's fulfilled in the coming visitation of the Lord. He's coming the flesh of Jesus. He's visiting in the body of Immanuel, God with us. Yes, it took a long time as far as we people are concerned. It took something like 2,500 years from the time of Abraham. But now it's happening. The covenant is being fulfilled. And in a way that's even beyond how God visited Abraham, He's visiting His people. And He's doing so raising up a horn of salvation. Now, a horn is a symbol of power. There is God in all of His power, coming to do what? To bring salvation, to save us from our enemies, to save us from the hand of all who hate us, to show the mercy promised to our fathers. The whole power of the God who has created the universe working to save His people.

And what will be accomplished in this? **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.** As Zechariah tells John that he will come to give knowledge of salvation and the forgiveness of sins, as this power all works toward this rescue, this is what it is. It is that rescue of forgiveness. It takes the people out of their sin, it takes them out of the power of the evil one, the devil, who would seek to destroy them, it enlivens them out of the slavery, the darkness, the grief and suffering that death brings. And it gives life. The salvation gives righteousness, holiness to these people. That they could stand before God and not fear that their actions are still tainted by their own sinfulness.

And Christians, that is what all of this means for you. That covenant of Abraham is fulfilled that the offspring of Abraham, his great, great, great, great, great, great, however many greats, grandson would be born of the virgin and all of that power would be laid in a manger. That was all for you. It was all for you that the covenant in the blood of this Lamb of God would be poured out on the altar of the cross you would be blessed by Him. Of course, Zechariah's son John got to be a big part of the life of Jesus. He got to pave the way for Him. He got to be that line between the Old Covenant and the fulfillment of the new, but it was all for redemption. For the redemption of mankind. For your redemption, that as He has baptized you into the New Covenant, as He has fed you with His sacrificial body, given you the blood of the covenant to drink, you are made anew in Him. You, Christian, are rescued from Sin, Death, and the Devil who hate you. You are rescued from the darkness of this world. You are given life. And you are holy in Him to serve Him without fear. Without the fear that you will be cast out of His presence into hell; without fear that your lacking is too much for Him; without fear that all the things and secrets He knows about you, your life, your thoughts, your words, without fear that any of that is greater than the power of His redemption.

Yes **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,** because of that You live in that light of Christ, and these words Zechariah spoke to John are fulfilled in your life. This God who is so attentive to fulfill His promises, promised to you in your baptism, promises to you in His Word, promises to you in His new covenantal meal that all of this is true for you. What a blessed hymn of comfort as we look to celebrate the birth of this Fulfillment. Amen.