

Title: Dawn's early light
Text: Luke 1.67-80
Theme: God always keeps his promise
Series: Advent 2013 #2
Prop Stmt: God is faithful to his promise because he is mighty to save.

Read Text:

400 years is a very long time. 400 years ago, the Europeans had just discovered the Americas. 400 years ago, the Jamestown Settlement was 6 years old and the Pilgrims were seven years away from landing at Plymouth Rock. In 400 years, empires rise and fall and nations are born and die. For at least 400 years (perhaps longer) the nation of Israel lived as a very dim reflection of her former glory. But in recent years, Herod's massive building campaign gave the appearance of strength, but only with the permission of Rome. But, he did rebuild the Temple (slide) on a scale that rivaled Solomon. But this time, there was no glory cloud. No fire from heaven in an apparent answer to the prayers that were offered. You see, there was no ark of the covenant. The Ark of the Covenant had never been recovered after the Babylonian invasion and the destruction of Solomon's temple. Every year on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies to offer the blood of a goat for the sins of the people, but there was no Mercy Seat to pour it on. It was a tradition that was carried on, but the reality was, God was no longer there. He formally acknowledged what his people had done to Him. They rebelled. So, he acknowledged it. And now...

For at least 400 years, there were no prophets who delivered a word from the Lord. Heaven was closed; the voice of God was silent. The people, who had been given the light of God's revelation from Genesis to Malachi, rejected it. So, God stopped talking. And yet, throughout the entire Old Testament, God had made a series of promises. The day would come when He would speak again. The people who walked in darkness would, one day, see the light dawn. God would speak again. God would move again. God would send another prophet and God would send the Messiah. He promised. Over and over He promised. But, that was at least 400 years ago.

How do you continue believing after 400 years? Zechariah did as well as his wife Elizabeth. Luke 1.6 says, that "*they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.*" But, it is clear from the account that Zechariah did not believe perfectly. This man, from the tribe of Levi, a priest, who was not only chosen for a tour of duty and ministry at the Temple, but he was chosen by lot to be able enter into the Temple proper and burn the daily incense. The Jewish priests were divided up into 24 groups who, with the exception of the three major holidays, would serve for a period of two weeks and then return home. And because there were around 18,000 priests, it was not only a huge honor to be able to go into the Temple and light the incense, but you could only do it once in your lifetime. This is a huge event for Zechariah. While he was in the Temple behind the closed doors, he is to offer the incense on the altar and then bow down and pray. This is probably at 3PM, when the afternoon sacrifice is offered and people would gather to watch and pray. We do not know exactly

what Zechariah prayed for. I am guessing that Zechariah was not praying for a child, having given up on that a long time ago, but was perhaps praying for the Messiah to appear or for the deliverance of Israel from her enemies. But, an angel of the Lord (Gabriel) appeared next to the incense altar and told him that his prayer had been heard and that he and Elizabeth would have a son and that they were to call his name, John. (Read vs. 14-17)

Now, hold the phone for a minute. Luke begins his account of the life of Christ with this event. This is the first recorded event by any of the gospel writers that happened in preparation of the birth of Christ. Matthew begins with the announcement to Mary. Mark begins with John the Baptist's ministry as well as John. Luke takes us back in time a little farther. This means, for the first time in 400 years, God has spoken. The silence is over. It is like the thawing of Narnia, and the appearance of the flower on the tree in front of the throne room of Minas Tirith. This is not the dawn, but it is the first sign of the dawn. An angel from God has appeared and he has come with a word from the Lord. When we hear these words that Gabriel spoke (vs. 14-17), we are tempted to gloss over them. I assure you that Zechariah did not! Do you know how the book of Malachi ends? Malachi is the last prophet that God sent to his people. The last words of God that were sent to his people were these, *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."* For hundreds of years, Israel lived with this last word from God. He would send a prophet, like Elijah who would prepare the way for the Messiah. And now, God has not only broken the silence, but He has picked up, right where He left off. And right here, Zechariah balks. When he says in v.18, "How shall I know this?" He is asking for a sign. The Word of God is apparently not enough for Zechariah, whose name, (Zechariah) ironically means, "Yahweh remembers." Not only that, but if you are looking for a sign, how about the angel Gabriel appearing out of nowhere to you in the Temple?! No wonder Gabriel said in response to that, *"I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."* What more of a sign do you want?

Do you see what happens? Gabriel tells Zechariah that until John is born, he will not be able to speak *"because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."* Not only was Zechariah not able to speak, but, look at v.62. Elizabeth wants to name her son John, but the people cannot understand why, so they ask Zechariah. But, notice how they communicate with him? They are making signs with their hands. This means that Zechariah is not only mute, but he is deaf. Zechariah is experiencing in nine months what Israel experienced for hundreds of years. Silence! He cannot speak and he cannot hear. Sometimes God is quiet because he is testing our faith, as he did with Job. Sometimes God is quiet because we have rebelled against the light that he has already given us. Look at what Zechariah did. He used the consequence of unbelief to be the occasion for repentance, faith, growth, and worship. He returns home and he has 9 months of silence. Imagine what life would be like if the TV, radio, cell phone and internet were all turned off for nine months. Zechariah was obviously able to think long

and hard about what Gabriel told him. He believed and he embraced it so that when the next opportunity came, he was ready. And boy was he ready.

Luke's second song of praise is penned and declared by Zechariah who was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. This song is a powerful declaration of God's faithfulness to keep his promises and an urgent call for us to believe them. But what I find so amazing about this song is that Zechariah gives very little attention to his son, because he is giving so much attention to God's Son.

You will not think right about your child unless you first think right about God's. Zechariah was thrilled that God had given Zechariah a son, but Zechariah saved his greatest praise because God was giving Zechariah, God's Son. Zechariah was able to think correctly about his boy because he understood that while his son was important, God's Son was more important. His son was the prophet and the forerunner. John was the opening act; Jesus was the main event. Your child is not the hero; Jesus is!

The outline only has two points because, if you notice, there are only two sentences in this hymn of praise. The first sentence is the longest and covers eight verses.

I. Bless God for what He is doing! (68-75)

You learn a lot about what matters to person based on what they praise. We certainly were given a view of Zechariah's passion for the Messiah from this song. So, what causes your heart to sing? What gets you excited? If you get more excited about soccer goals and GPA's than you do godliness, you are teaching your children to live for the wrong goal. What gets your applause? What do you rejoice in? While Zechariah initially doubted, the word of Gabriel, it is clear from the text that Zechariah's life (and Elizabeth as well) was marked by believing that God would indeed keep his Word. This was the light on the shore towards which they headed. What is the light toward which your boat is headed? Do you live with a purpose, a passion, intentionally and consciously banking on the promises of God? If God called you to be a prominent player in his plan by giving you an unusual, even challenging role to fulfill, would you be good with that?

A. Bless God because He has come. (68)

Zechariah is now so full of faith, that 6 months before Christ is born, when Mary has just completed her first trimester, Zechariah is already declaring that God has come. God is here. And he is!! He is so confident in God's act of redemption that Zechariah speaks of it as if it has already taken place. He is that sure!

B. Bless God because He has come to save. (69)

God has raised up a horn of salvation. This is not a horn that you play. It is not a horn that you sound. This is referring to the horn of an ox. God has raised up a warrior like a mighty ox with powerful and protruding horns. This beast can trample and crush, gore and destroy. This needs to be understood. The coming of Christ is a blessing and a curse.

He comes to rescue those who believe and he comes to crush those who rebel. Those who rebel not only rebel against God, but in their rebellion they seek to destroy those who believe.

If this song were to be translated into a painting, we would be looking east. The ground before us would gently rise until it came to a crest. In the sky behind the crest, would be the reds and oranges of dawn just beginning to show their promise of the sun, which is coming. Standing on the crest is an ox. He is resolute and firm. And hanging from one of his horns is a lifeless serpent, which has been gored just behind the head. The name of the painting, if you needed it, is: Salvation has come!

C. He has come to save like he promised.

Zechariah knows these things because Mary has been with he and Elizabeth for three months. He has had time to think much on all of this and he realizes what this means. The Messiah is here.

1. In the line of David
2. As the prophets said

This salvation is described in four different ways:

- 1) He has come to save us from our enemies.
- 2) He has come to show mercy to our fathers.
- 3) He has come to remember the covenant.
- 4) He has come to keep his promise to Abraham.

All of this culminates in God's purpose and plan to have a people who will serve him without fear, in holiness, righteousness before him all our days.

Zechariah is longing for the day when God's people will be able to serve God without fear of their enemies. At this point, Zechariah does not know about the cross. His assumption is that the Messiah will come and will deliver Israel both spiritually and physically. He longs for God's people to have their hearts turned to the Lord and rejoices that his son is going to be the prelude for this. So, when Zechariah says "that we might be delivered from the hand of our enemies, that we might serve him without fear..." we must assume that Zechariah is thinking of the Messiah as this horn of salvation who will crush the enemies of Israel, who are presumably the enemies of God.

But I think that Zechariah is actually saying more than he realizes at the moment. (v.67) He was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. Think about this with me. What were the Israelites greatest fears through the years? Was it not that another nation was going to come in and destroy them, take away their land, their homes, their fields, their flocks, their cities, and their Temple? Was it not that they were going to be sent away as slaves to serve other nations? However, when Israel was faithful to God, God protected her from her enemies. How could the Messiah not only deliver them from their enemies but

liberate them to serve God without fear and to serve God in holiness and righteousness before him all our days? How could that happen? After all, there were times when Israel did follow God, but they just did not last very long. So, here Zechariah is praising God because he is going to do something that has not been done before.

God's plan is not to simply deliver you from something, but to deliver you to something. He desires that we serve him without fear. Think about that. What does it mean to serve without fear? ... How many of you work in a tense or somewhat hostile environment? You feel as if your boss has you by the throat. If you do not work overtime, meet ridiculous deadlines, take on the workload of two or three others, then you will be fired because in this climate there is always someone else ready to take your place. It may not be slavery in the literal sense, but it has some of the same feelings. Your value, in the eyes of others has little or nothing to do with you as a person, but is determined only in terms of what you can produce for the company. You dread going to work. You work with others who dread going to work. Every one is afraid to speak up.

A man I know had a boss/manager who told him once, "I will push you and push you and push until you just about break. Then I will back off just a bit, and then push you and push you and push even more. I want to get everything I can out of you. And if it is not enough, I will let you go and get someone else in here who will give me what I want." That is not how God functions. So, if God wants us to serve him without fear, what does that mean? For one, fear has to do with punishment. You are free to serve without fear, when you realize that the threat of punishment is gone. I ask God to open your heart to this truth. When Christ went to the cross for you, he died in your place. He took the punishment for your sins upon himself. When you come to faith in Christ, you are credited with his life and death. That means that there is no threat of punishment any more. You are free to serve. You are not under a threat.

Zechariah does not live long enough to see any of this come to pass, but he knows that it will. He knows that God is on the move. The promises that he has made, he keeps. ...

II. Bless God that we get to be part of this. (76-79)

It is not until this point that Zechariah says anything about his son and when he does, he realizes that his son is part of a bigger plan. His son is here in order to:

A. Point people to Christ. (76)

Do you see what is happening here? A couple is given a son in their old age. This son is entrusted to them as the fulfillment of God's promise in Malachi to send a prophet who will prepare the way for the Messiah. Zechariah and Elizabeth have been living through the silent years with no evidence that anything is going to change, and yet they believe God's promises. They are not only convinced that God is going to send the Messiah to the earth, they long for it. They pray for it. They are passionate about it. They look for it and listen for it. Now, as we noted, they did not do it perfectly. Zechariah initially doubted, but God gave him the time to learn and God gave him a second chance, even in

his old age to demonstrate that he believed God. And, oh did he? He named him John and then God opened up his voice that he might praise God. And he does! He lives for the kingdom and therefore, he recognizes that his own son is here on the earth at this time in order to prepare the way for Christ. God has given him a son who is here to point people to Christ.

The chapter closes on Zechariah and Elizabeth. We do not hear anymore about them. But the next time we read about John the Baptist is 30 years later and he is pointing people to Christ. I mean he is literally pointing and saying, "There he is! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." And that was what Zechariah is praising God about, isn't it? Look at v.77

B. Speak about the God who saves. (77-78)

My son is going to give knowledge of salvation to his people. And if Zechariah was able to live to see John preaching, he would see that yes his son did just that. He did his part. He fulfilled his mission. In some ways, John's life and ministry was like a shooting start that looked impressive for a very short time, but who's initial "success" faded, and who died early, executed for speaking the truth. He left no children, no possessions, no business, no home. What he did have was the smile and favor of Christ who said that there was no human being who was ever greater. He did exactly what he was called to do, though Zechariah probably had no idea that John's life would be cut so short.

C. Speak about the God who brings light to those in darkness and peace to those in distress. (79)

When we resume our study of Matthew's gospel, we are going to come across John the Baptist two more times (chapters 11 and 14). We are going to see the evidence of a life that was given to point people to the true Light that would save them. John the Baptist is the one who spoke about Christ and said, "He must increase and I must decrease." (John 3.30) In many ways, that is exactly what John's dad said that John was supposed to do. You can raise your children to be part of the darkness or to carry the light. You cannot do both.

Parents, do you realize why God gave you children? God did not give you children so that you could dress them up and get compliments. He did not give you children so that they would be "successful" and make you feel adequate and vindicated. He did not give you children so that there would be more people in this world chasing empty dreams and the accumulation of stuff. He gave you children to have more people who could point others to Christ. Here is a very important question to consider. How important is the gospel to your parenting? Do you see the gospel as the truth that you hope that your children believe so that they are covered in case something tragic happens to them? Or do you see it as more than that? Do you see the gospel as the driving force of your life and you desire for it to be the driving force of theirs?

At the beginning of this year, I mapped out a training plan that I had hoped would put me in a position to qualify to run the Boston Marathon in the spring of 2015. The plan included a half marathon in the spring, a full marathon in June, and the St. Jude Marathon in December, held in Memphis, TN. This last one is a fundraiser for the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, and it is run on a Saturday. On Friday, the local news reporters in Memphis acted as if the city was in the midst of the storm of the century. Ice Armageddon was here! Temperatures had fallen to 32 degrees and any moment now, a large glacier would form and take over the city! It was comical. On Friday night, the race was cancelled. 20,000 runners had come from all over the country to run in this and they cancelled the race. Now, keep in mind that on Thanksgiving, there were 22,000 runners in Detroit, running in 20 degree temps, and in snow. In Memphis, they cancelled when the roads were bone dry and they stayed that way. Now, if I lived to run, then I would be very upset. But I don't. Running is something I do, but it is not the reason for my life, please. Running is optional, Christ and the gospel isn't. Parents, do you hear me?

Baseball is optional. Basketball, soccer, football, gymnastics, cross-country, boy scouts, is optional and none of it is eternal. None of it will rescue your child from sin. Your kids need Christ. Only Christ is Mighty to Save! They will usually value what you praise and what you prioritize.