

Title: The Promised Prophet
Text: Luke 1.57-80
Theme: God's plan
Series: Advent 2008 #4
Prop Stmt. God will change the world by changing you.

Read Text:

I love the Southwest airline commercial, where the girl is nosing around in someone else's medicine cabinet and knocks the shelves down resulting in quite a mess, and mortification of being discovered. The screen turns blue with orange words - Wanna get away? What are you in the middle of right now that makes you "wanna get away." Have you made such a mess of things that you just want to disappear? When I was about 8, I ran a small John Deere tractor into the driver's side door of my great uncle's new Buick. I not only wanted to get away, I did. I ran a few blocks away and climbed way up an apple tree and hid for a couple of hours. It seemed like the logical thing to do, but eventually I had to come down. Wanna get away seems fine, until you realize that you have to come back. But we don't always think that far down the road. We are just looking for a quick fix, a band-aid, a topical ointment that will make it all better. We want our circumstances to change. We want relief! God, get me out of this mess!

Christmas is often a time of regret because there are things that are in your life that you wish were different. What do you do about that? You may want relief, but God wants change. The news that the Messiah was coming was exhilarating to those who thought that His coming would bring relief and the restoration of Israel's glory. Just like us, they wanted someone to change their reality. But, when Christ came, He did not talk about relief as much as he talked about change. But the change He spoke of, was not a change of circumstances, but a change of heart. Wanna get away, or wanna make a change? Getting away is easier, initially much easier. Then it becomes hard. Making a change is hard, initially much more difficult, then it is easier.

It is easy to create a religious following based on "getting away" since so many people just want to escape. Church can be built as escapism. With the right setting, strategy and manipulation, you can give people an adrenalin rush of Jesus. With the right tactics you can get people to leave their problems at the door and come in and check out of life and just get juiced up on Jesus for a while. It sounds appealing and it can be very, very addicting. But Christ did not come to the earth so that you wouldn't get the flu and so that you could find all your Christmas gifts on sale.

Christ incarnated, meaning become one of us, so that He could identify with us and walk in our shoes, and then wide-eyed, and opened-arm, and broken-hearted take our sins and burdens with Him to the cross so that you could understand that God wants to do infinitely more than make you feel good for a moment, He loves you so much He is going to change you from the inside out so that one day, people will not be able to tell the difference between you and Jesus! Genuine Christianity will have some adrenalin moments along with the way. Genuine Christianity will have some times of fresh

realization of the gospel, and fresh times of repentance and fresh times of worship but genuine Christianity is a long-obedience in the same direction built upon a Savior who came to us in our need; who's feet got dirty from our roads, who saved us to walk with Him. Before He changes all of our circumstances, He changes us. But don't lose sight of the fact, that one day He will change the circumstances too. And like these people in the opening chapter of Luke, we may have a front row seat. But hang on. Because, if you just want relief, you won't understand the real purpose of Christ's coming, nor will you understand the true nature of His Kingdom. If you just want relief, you won't understand the true goal of the gospel. And shame on us for presenting it as if all Jesus did was come to the earth so that you could go to heaven. Wanna get away? Just pray this prayer and you can go to heaven? That wasn't the point. His purpose was to die in order to secure for Himself a people who will live with Him forever in His kingdom. These are people whose lives are changed from the inside out in such a way that these lives are looking more and more like Christ. The funny thing is, that when you want change, more than you want relief, then you get relief, but not in the way that you initially thought. All of that is put on display in this text. This text tells us the story of the birth of John, the prophet, the forerunner of Christ, and the one who becomes identified as the Baptist, because he baptized people. It is divided up into two parts: 1) the account of John's birth and his naming and 2) the song of praise given by his father, Zechariah. The first part focuses more on the initial event while the second part connects the dots to God's plan.

1. **When God Keeps His Promise** (57 – 66)

The birth of the Prophet John was the fulfillment of a promise that God had made to Zechariah.

A. **There is Joy.** 57-58

Here is a rural community, where everybody knows everybody's business. That ain't all bad! Here, this close-knit societal fabric comes together to share in the joy of a birth to an aged couple. Now, this is news!

Illustration – Alleman paper carries news of visiting my grandparents for Christmas.

Elizabeth is in seclusion (all 9 months?!). Mary has come to help, now the news is out – Elizabeth was not only pregnant, but she has given birth to a son! More than likely the community mid-wife was called, and word spread – really fast! (1.14)

Was Zechariah deaf, as well as mute? The actions of the people seem to indicate this.

B. **There is Trust.** 59-64

The crowd just assumed that the child would be named Zechariah. It was a very common custom to name a first born son after a relative (father or grandfather).

Elizabeth protests, but what does she know, after all, she is only the mom (at least that is the impression that the reader is given – and probably rightly so). Naming was often a man’s only task, (which perhaps that is why so many were named after their dads and grandfathers). But Zechariah can’t talk, so the crowd speaks for him. Elizabeth says, “No! He is to be called John.” The crowd doesn’t understand. To name the boy John, when there is no in the family by that name would be to go against the way we do things. Well, the way things are done are about to get turned upside down. God is about to invade planet earth. That is change you can believe in. So, they turn to Zechariah. Is Elizabeth (perhaps the crowd is thinking this) taking advantage of the fact that Zechariah can’t speak and is naming his son against his wishes? His response is awesome!

Sub-plot, Zechariah learned to trust God as evidenced by how John is named. “His name IS John.” Zechariah is given a 2nd chance and he does not waste it – does he? His name IS John. For Zechariah, he knows that this boy is from God, and is named by God (signifying ultimate ownership and rights). Wow, an old man, having his first child, and can’t even talk about it!! But, now he does.

Mom and Dad go against accepted customs in order to obey God. Their son will do the same.

So in the span of a few verses, we have 3 highly unusual events: 1) An old woman gives birth to a son. 2) The son is called an unusual name. 3) Zechariah’s silence is removed.

Zecharias – God remembers His covenant

Elizabeth – God is the absolutely faithful one

John – God is merciful, or the gift of the mercy of God

Jesus – God saves, or divine Savior

C. **There is Awe.** (65-66)

Zechariah is finally able to talk and he starts praising God. The result of these unusual events helped prepare the people for something else that was going to happen. There was awe, buzz, thought and anticipation. The very birth of John reflected his life, purpose and ministry. God kept His word, delivered by Gabriel to Zechariah. But, this promise that God kept was part of His plan that was going public – again. There are times in the course of His-story that God does things that totally outside of how He normally functions. Jerry gave a great description of this in our Thanksgiving Eve service when he spoke about the providences of God. God’s normal activities are carried out through the laws that He has established. Every once in a while, God acts outside of the normal laws to do things that get people’s attention, or sometimes God does things in such an incredible way (promise-fulfillment), that we just stand in awe and shake our head’s in amazement. John’s birth, though natural, in one sense, was supernatural in that God was fulfilling His Word.

2. **When God goes Public** (67-80)

The birth of the prophet John was not only the fulfillment of a promise that God had made to Zechariah, it was the fulfillment of promises that God had made to his people, hundreds of years before. Now, while God did what he said for Zechariah and Elizabeth He was carrying out what He had said that He would on the world stage.

The song of Zechariah (at the birth of his son John) Songs are written to commemorate major events. They reflect what people consider to be important. Here you have God working His plan to rescue Israel from within Israel and He does it (in part) by giving life to a hopeless and barren couple. God delights in doing the impossible in order to receive all the credit.

A. His Sovereign Power demands a response of Praise. (68-75)

This song weaves both themes of remembering and mercy together. When the Bible says that God remembered, it is not as if God forgot and then said, “Oh my word! I told them I would rescue them! I almost forgot.” No, God’s remembering refers to how his actions appear to us. He is carrying out his promises, but they are done in such a way that He demonstrates that they are always. In it we are reminded of God’s promises to build a kingdom on the earth, and to change the hearts of people. The gospel does not begin with social justice, but neither does it end with going to heaven when you die. The heart of redemption is not about freeing oppressed people in the world, but the tentacles of redemption will affect social structures. When God brought salvation to the earth (through Christ), He went after the hearts of people (yes!) AND, He is forging these new-hearted people into a new kingdom that will reign on the earth under Christ. Salvation is a matter of the heart that will affect the earth.

Redemption and Salvation does not start with changing my circumstances, but with changing my heart, which changes my life, which changes my world! You can’t work out, what don’t have in.

The priest is now prophesying. The one who first did not believe is given a second chance, and not only does he believe, but he is ready to talk about it! There are 16 OT parallels in this song. Zechariah knew how pray, praise and sing.

God’s sovereign power is seen in his fulfillment of his promise to deliver his people through the line of David. (68-69)

The Lord “has come” (68) is a word used to describe a doctor visiting the sick (mercy and help). Isn’t that comforting? Zechariah knew that help was on the way for God’s people, even if Zechariah was not going to live long enough to see the ministry of his son or of Christ. Just knowing that God was coming through for his people filled Zechariah with joy. The Lord “has redeemed” (68) is a word used to describe a rescue from slavery. Of course this reminds of the deliverance that Israel experienced from Egypt and now she needs it again. Now, we know that God was using all of these political conditions as a way to reveal spiritual realities. Physical slavery is bad. Spiritual slavery

is worse, must worse. Christ came to set the captives free first from the slavery to sin, and then from physical enslavement.

“Horn of salvation” (69) Is a phrase that refers to strength, since the horn of an animal is the expression of power for protection and deliverance; Zechariah clearly made this as a reference to Christ (and not to his son) since Zechariah is not from the line of David. Zechariah clearly sees that the birth of his son is part of God’s fulfillment of his promises to send the Messiah who will deliver.

Zechariah realizes that God’s promises made “through his holy prophets” (70) are being fulfilled right before his eyes and it involves him! God’s mercy to His people means that God deals justly with those who hate God and who express that hatred by the way in which they deal with his people. (71) Notice that the salvation that Zechariah speaks of is a rescue from the enemies of God’s people. These enemies are usually seen as the surrounding nations to Israel, (which they were), but when Christ came, He revealed the fact that the physical enemies were illustrations of an even greater enemy. Your greatest enemy is not those outside of you, but yourself. That is why salvation has to begin in our hearts. It is more than who will rescue us from the Romans, or who will rescue us from this bad economy, or who will rescue us from these depressing circumstances, or this diagnosis? Who will rescue us from the mess that we have made in our own lives? That was the enormous stumbling block for the Jews. They wanted a Messiah who would rescue them from their enemies, and Jesus said, I will do that, beginning with what you have done to yourselves. Before we start with the Romans, we have to start with your own heart. That was not the message they wanted to hear. Before we blame them, let’s admit that we don’t like that message either. We always want to point out the problems with others – and there are problems with others. But, Christ came to deliver us from our sin, then to change the world. So, that is the order of priority for us. Let’s deal with our own lives, then look to helping others. Both are important. Because as we see in verses 74-75, God made promises to Abraham based on His mercy and covenant, to enable us to serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. Wow! What an incredible promise!

Friday morning, I went outside fairly early to start shoveling the drive. As much as we complain about the snow, and the timing of it, this snow was gorgeous. I stood outside and just let the snow fall on me – and it did. It was so quiet. The snow was a like millions of pieces of thread that lightly fell into place to form this thick and heavy blanket. Now, I would like you to reflect on this promise that Zechariah is reflecting on. Let this truth be like the snow and stand under it while it falls upon your heart and wraps your soul in its thick layers of mercy and grace. God’s purposes in delivering you from conflict and problems is so that you are enabled to serve (word also has the idea of worship) without fear (of what others may think or do), in holiness (no sin, no guilt that weighs upon your conscience) and righteousness (totally pure motives), before him all our days (never, ever, ever, getting tired or distracted).

But the other thing that Zechariah models for us is the fact that when we realize that God's sovereign promises are being fulfilled, that is not only an opportunity to praise God, it is only fitting that we are amazed and humbled by it.

B. His Sovereign Plan demands a response of humble obedience. (76-80)

God's plan involved the raising up of a prophet to prepare the people for the Messiah! That is not only amazing, but this prophet is Zechariah's son. But, the way that Zechariah expresses this (76-79) does not point to the greatness of John, but places the attention upon the mercy of God. Notice the phrase "because of the tender mercy of our God." (78) All of these things are coming true because God has chosen to pour out His mercy upon us in our desperate hour of need. Zechariah, in giving praise to God at the birth of his son, and blessing his son, does so in a way that he praises and blesses the One whom His Son will point to!

God will act upon the promises that He has made. He always acts on a personal level, and will act on a public level, although there is a sense in which everything that happens on a public level is simply the culmination of His providences on a "small" level. There are no insignificant acts of God. There are no insignificant promises of God. There are no insignificant people of God. You are part of the plan of God. You are part of what God is doing to prepare a kingdom for His Son. His kingdom for you must begin in you. You must bow the will of your life, completely before the merciful and sovereign throne of Christ.

When you understand the true nature of the problem, then you can understand the true power of the solution in Christ. Then you can begin to grasp the true scope of His plan.

One of the things that is so refreshing about Zechariah is that he realizes that it is not about John, it's all about Christ. Zechariah and Elizabeth were called to have a son who would put the Son on display. Why has God given you a job? Why has God given you children? Why has God given you singleness? Why has God given you unemployment? Why has God given you challenges and blessings? The answer is the same. It is to put Christ on display. But you cannot do that if you are only focused on the injustices that surround you or the sins that have been committed against you. God will deal with those. But for you, right now,

Long for change that begins in you. That change can only come through Christ.
Long for change that continues in you. That process can only continue through Christ.
Long for change that works out from you. That display of Christ is best seen in adversity.
Long for the final change that enables you to serve Him – forever and ever in holiness and righteousness.

In Christ alone