

Texts: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke3:1-6

Advent begins new year in the church and for most of the coming year we are going to read the gospel of Luke. Beginnings are important, and Luke begins with the story of the angel Gabriel foretelling the amazing birth of a baby boy, who is destined for great things in the story of salvation. This birth is remarkable not because the boy's mother is a virgin, but because she is old. She is Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah, a priest in the temple. Hers is a story that we find throughout the Bible – the story of a woman who thought that she could not have a child, but who then finds out that she will give birth to a very special son. The story of Elizabeth and Zechariah reminds us of Sarah and Abraham, whose son Isaac was the heir to God's promise. It reminds us of the story of Hannah and Elkanah, whose son Samuel was dedicated to God's work.

This time, here in Luke's story, Zechariah, like Abraham, prays for what seems to be impossible. So Gabriel comes to bring the good news that his prayer has been answered and that he and Elizabeth will have a son, whose name is to be John. But Zechariah, like Abraham and Sarah, doesn't actually believe that the answer is yes, and he questions the angel. Gabriel responds by taking away Zechariah's voice, striking him mute, unable to speak.

For nine months, Zechariah can't talk. What would that be like? Particularly in a time and place where men had most of the say. We can only imagine what Elizabeth talked about during those months.

Fast forward to the baby's birth, to the day he is to be circumcised and named. Zechariah still can't speak, and no one believes Elizabeth when she says that the baby boy is to be named John. The folks who have gathered turn to Zechariah, and he asks for

something to write with. “His name is John,” he writes. At that moment, his voice returns, and the words that we have spoken this morning are what he says. Let me read them again:

“Blessed be the God of Israel...”

Zechariah’s poem is an Advent poem. It connects the story of Jesus Christ to the story of Israel – the story of a people whom God has chosen and to whom God has given a covenant. The story of a people who were freed from slavery and brought into a land of promise. The story of a people who have been pressed down and flattened by one empire after another: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome. The story of a people who have fallen away, who have worshipped idols and forgotten their Most High God. And yet God has not forgotten them. This song, this poem, this prayer recalls God’s mercy and salvation in the midst of sin and suffering, in the midst of destruction and death. Zechariah’s words remember the promise of the covenant, the promise of salvation, the promise of a Messiah, the promise of renewal and hope.

Zechariah holds his newborn son John, whose name means “God is gracious,” and feels God’s grace through the sweep of history and the promise of what is to come. Zechariah holds his newborn son in his arms and predicts for this baby John that he will be called the prophet of the Most High. Zechariah’s words take us back to the words of the prophets themselves. Back to the words of Malachi: “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.” Back to the words of Isaiah: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’” We learn from the gospel reading that Zechariah’s prediction for his son does come to pass. John will come to be known as John the Baptizer, and he will prepare the way for Jesus. Zechariah knows that God’s promise

is true. God promised him and Elizabeth a son, and he praises God for all the other promises that he knows will come to pass.

Zechariah's song of praise is an Advent song of praise. It has come to be known as the Benedictus, which is the Latin word for "blessed," the first word. This prayer has come down to us in the liturgy of morning prayer. You can look in the red hymnal on page 303, and there it is in the service of morning prayer. For centuries, as the sun rises, these words have held meaning and promise for Christians: In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine on those in darkness and the shadow of death.

What does it mean for you to hear that God's promise breaks over you like the morning sunrise? At this time of year, darkness comes early and stays late. And we can't help but think of the places of darkness that we know personally. Yet as Zechariah speaks, as we hear his words, and as we say them ourselves, this prayer of praise and thanksgiving connects our own lives with all of human history. With Abraham and Sarah, with Hannah and Elkanah and all the kings and prophets of the Old Testament -- with Zechariah and Elizabeth and Joseph and Mary and all the ordinary people who knew that God was doing something amazing in their lives.

This is the second Sunday of Advent and the candle we lit today is the candle of peace. And we pray with Zechariah, that God will guide our feet in the way of peace.

Zechariah's prayer is an Advent prayer. This longing for peace is an Advent longing. For as many years as I've been alive, I can remember that somewhere in the world during Advent, there has been conflict and war. When I was a kid it was Vietnam. Then the 7-day war between Israel and Egypt. Then the Soviet-Afghan war, and the Iran-

Iraq war, and then the First Gulf War, and then the Balkans, and Rwanda, and Iraq and Afghanistan. The reports come in from Syria and the Central African Republic and Ukraine and Pakistan – bloodshed and fighting and hatred. Terrorism and mass killings.

The goal of war is not peace, but victory. Even when fighting ends, the result is usually not peace, but a truce. A draw. Each side withdrawing to whatever border it claims and some kind of neutral zone in the middle. This is true in whatever conflict you want to name – whether it is war between nations or war between political parties or war between neighbors over the fence line.

Peace is not the absence of fighting. Peace is not resignation or passivity. Peace is not niceness or good manners or going along to get along. Peace is not simply tolerating those who were your enemies. Peace is becoming friends with your enemies. Peace is throwing away the weapons and sitting down to talk. Peace is getting to know the other side, the other person. Peace is stepping across to the other side and listening to what the person you hate has to say.

To ask God to guide our feet in the way of peace is to ask God to lead us in peace-making. Peace that means fullness of life, wholeness, well-being, security and contentment for every single person who lives. Every single person. To ask God to guide our feet in the way of peace is to examine the systems in which we live and to ask who is hurt and who is helped. To lay aside our own priorities and put someone else first. To reconcile with enemies.

The shadow of the cross falls across the manger. And in that cross is the refusal to meet violence with violence. That cross is the undoing of war and death and hatred.

Zechariah's song is an Advent song. For 2,000 years now we have been singing of the promise that God made to the people of Israel and to us. We sing of the hope we have in Christ's birth. We sing of the hope we have that Christ will come again.

We gather together here, as the body of Christ, to listen to the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth and their baby son John and to remember that each one of us is also part of God's story of salvation and promise and hope. Each one of us has gifts to use to prepare God's way, to bring God's peace into our world.

Come and eat and drink at Christ's table. And then go, with renewed courage, to be peace-makers, peace-builders, peace-bringers. Blessed be the God of Israel, who comes to set us free.