

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 5, 2021
Luke 1:57-79

A Song of Salvation

Keep in mind that Zechariah had been unable to speak. For nine months and eight days, he had been unable to speak. Ever since that fateful day Gabriel had appeared to him while he was on duty in the temple. The Angel Gabriel had said to him, *“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John”* [Luke 1:13].

Well, Zechariah was afraid. Wouldn't you be if an angel appeared suddenly to you, at the place where you work, and started speaking? When Zechariah finally mustered up the courage to respond, what came out was, *“How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.”* To which the angel replied, *“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”* (I don't know; maybe Gabriel was having a bad day.)

But imagine being a priest, and unable to speak. Imagine being the husband of an aging, barren wife, who had discovered one day that she was pregnant. And they couldn't even talk about it together! Imagine those nine months, as Elizabeth's body slowly but miraculously changed. Imagine the deep feelings growing in Zechariah's heart, feelings he couldn't share, not with Elizabeth, not with anyone. Imagine how he silently pondered day after day, about the things Gabriel had said to him. How his child *“will be great in the sight of the Lord”* [1:15]. How he would have *“the spirit and power of Elijah”* [1:17]. The power of Elijah? In my son?!

The time finally came for Elizabeth to give birth [1:57-58]. Think how terrifying that must have been, for both of them! But the Lord *showed his great mercy to her. And she gave birth to a son!* Imagine how Zechariah had silently held his son, “speaking” to him only with his eyes, his gentle touch.

Then came the day for them to take their son to the temple to be *circumcised* [1:59]. As a priest Zechariah had done circumcisions, hundreds of them. He knew about the pain, how his newborn son would scream and cry.

But more importantly, this was the day to name his son. And Zechariah had had nine months and eight days to think about it. The neighbors had designs on naming him after his father. But Elizabeth was determined. *“No; he is to be called John”* [1:60]. “John?” the neighbors protested. Why John? *None of your relatives has that name* [1:61]. They tried asking Zechariah what he thought. Unable to tell them, he asked for a writing tablet and furiously wrote, *“His name is John”* [1:63]. *“Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed”* [1:64]. Imagine all those pent-up feelings and “ponderings,” suddenly released, like flood water from a dam. Imagine how terrified his *neighbors* must have been [1:65].

But then something even stranger and more terrifying happened. An odd look came over Zechariah. And this time, when he opened his mouth, it was as if a different voice began to speak through him. They were words of praise, yes, but they were also words of *prophecy* [1:67]. They were a song. A song of salvation.

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he was looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.” Do you recognize that word “redeem?” We have been hearing it a lot in recent weeks, in the sermon series on Ruth. Does anybody remember what the word means? To redeem means to restore, to buy back. Just as Boaz redeemed or bought back the land that had belonged to Elimelech and then restored it to Naomi, so God had bought Israel back, a long time ago, and brought them back from their exile in Babylon, brought them back to their home, their temple. The very temple where Zechariah served as a priest. The very temple in which he now stood, his tongue at long last loosened.

Zechariah continues: *“He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David.”* He’s talking of course about the Messiah. Who now already is in Mary’s womb, just as John had been in Elizabeth’s womb. The phrase “mighty savior” can also be translated “horn of salvation.” Like a horn that announces good news to the people, perhaps the coming of God’s Kingdom. Like the horn the prophet Ezekiel prophesied about centuries earlier, when he said *“On that day I will cause a horn to sprout up for the house of Israel, and I will open your lips among them. Then they shall know that I am the LORD, Yahweh” [Ezek 29:21].*

Zechariah’s prophesy continues: *“As he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.”* What holy prophets was he talking about this time? How about . . . Isaiah, who said *“It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the LORD because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them” [Isaiah 19:20].* It was indeed the Egyptians who oppressed the Israel when they were slaves in that foreign country. And the Babylonians who oppressed them in their exile. But who was oppressing them now? What enemies might Zechariah have in mind. Rome, perhaps, who held all of Judea under its thumb? King Herod, Rome’s puppet king? Would the redemption or salvation the Messiah would bring be salvation from their ruling Roman oppressors?

“Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear” [1:72-74]. Our God, Zechariah is reminding Israel, and now us, is a God of promise. A God of covenant. A God whose will it is that we be able to serve him without fear.

Perhaps Zechariah’s people were afraid of the Roman soldiers, or the Roman emperor, or King Herod. That would be understandable. But who, or what, are we afraid of? Who are our enemies? Who are the ones that “hate” us? We are not oppressed by our rulers, are we, in this “land of the free and home of the brave?” Our country is founded not on oppression but on freedom. (Make that “freedom.”) No, maybe we ourselves are not oppressed, here at First Mennonite Church. But perhaps others in our great country do feel oppressed. Disadvantaged in some way. Maybe because of their ethnicity, or choice of religion. Are there some right here in Hillsboro who are oppressed by an economic system they just can’t catch up with? I imagine we’re neighbors to some of these people. Is it possible that we, rather than being the oppressed, are somehow the oppressors? *[Isaiah 19:20 again].* If so, God is putting us on notice. God’s “horn of salvation” is sounding. Do we hear it?

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” [Luke 1:78-79].

Peace. It’s a word we don’t talk as much about these days. Not like we used to. Although we have been hearing the word a lot today. The candle for the Second Sunday of

Advent is the candle of peace. But what does this word even mean, now that our country is not openly at war?

How about peace as the absence of violence? Violence in our homes. Violence in our streets. How about peace as the absence of gunfire (like the tragic gunfire that happened in yet another school, this time at Oxford High School in Michigan)? How about peace as its Hebrew counterpart *shalom*, in which everyone having enough, having what they need—no more, but no less?

Zechariah's "Song of Salvation" is a song of redemption, of rescue, of restoration. It is a Song of Peace. In a few weeks the angels will be singing that same song (or another like it) when they announce the birth of another baby and sing for all to hear: "*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!*" [Luke 2:14]. May we sing it right along with them.