

Light to Those Who Sit in Darkness
Luke 1:57-80
December 20, 2020
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CenterPoint Church

Read Luke 1:57-80

("The grass withers and the flower falls but the word of the Lord endures forever")

Introduction: Communicating When You Can't Speak

How good are you at the game charades, the game where you can't say anything and have to act things out? I've been part of lots of little gatherings where we've played either charades or fishbowl, which uses charades in one of its rounds, and it's always good for a lot of laughs. Watching people try to act out sports or animals or historical figures makes for good theater, right? Especially if you're on the other team and find it humorous to throw in distracting, wrong guesses... not that I would ever do that. You're reminded that it's very frustrating to communicate when you can't speak. When you lose your voice with illness or have extensive dental work done, you wish you had mastered sign language. I am in awe of people who are fluent in sign language, especially people who learn it to communicate better with their deaf child or sibling or friend. That is such a loving thing to do.

In the Scripture passage we're looking at today, Zechariah, the priest, has been mute (and probably deaf too) for about ten months, the entire length of his wife's pregnancy. Why? If you remember, the angel Gabriel had told Zechariah that his older, barren wife would bear him a son, who would have a special role in God's plans on earth. But this upright, godly priest had a hard time believing that. So the Lord struck him mute until the baby would be born. Zechariah must have walked around the house and at work just acting things out or writing furiously on his tablet to make himself known. And he'll be using that tablet today to let everyone know his son's name. And the cool thing is that when Zechariah finally gets his speech back, he uses his tongue to utter the prophecies of the Holy Spirit and to praise his great Lord. I said last week that there were four "songs" in Luke's early chapters. Last week was Mary's song and Zechariah will have one as well.

Before we get to his song, though, the first nine verses record how

I. Zechariah the Priest Was Given Speech (vv. 57-64)

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." ⁶¹ And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." ⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.

Elizabeth gave birth to this son that she had waited and hoped for for decades. The whole neighborhood, friends and family, celebrated with her. The baby had no name for the first seven days of his life, for some reason they waited until he was circumcised. And everyone assumed the baby would be named after his father. My dad's name is David, and he named me that since I was his first-born. He also really hoped that one of his grandsons would be named David as well. I remember him promising my brothers and me the "lion's share of the inheritance" (which has always been his favorite bribe, a cynical person would call it an empty promise) if we named one of

our sons after him. Well, I'm the only one who had sons, and we decided that it would be way too complicated to have three generations of Daves in the family. Sorry, Dad. I have a cousin whose father's name is Mike, her brother's name is Mike, her first husband's name was Mike, and her son's name is Mike. They use Michael and Mikey and "young Mike" to differentiate, but it's rather confusing. Well, here in Zechariah and Elizabeth's case, all of their neighbors assumed that they wanted the boy to be named Zechariah, or at least some name within the family. The parents didn't resist that idea because of potential confusion (like we did), but because they had specific instructions from heaven to name the boy John. That's a great rule of thumb: if God picks out the name, go with it. Even if nobody else in the family has that name and all your friends think it's a bad idea. In fact, in any area of life, when God has ideas that nobody else supports, you're wise to stick with what He's told you.

Zechariah's act of obedience allows his temporary mute state to go away. It seems that he was also deaf because verse 62 says that they needed to make signs to him. Do you remember back in v. 20 the angel Gabriel had told him, "*you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.*" There is a rebuke that Zechariah did not believe, so the implication is that he must act on his belief to be able to speak again. It helps that everything has now come about: his elderly wife has both conceived and borne her son. I wonder if Zechariah had gone along his neighbors and relatives, "Oh yeah, call him Zechariah" if he would have stayed mute for the rest of his life? But he did not, he obeyed Gabriel's instruction to call him John. And instead of being bitter about not being able to speak for nine months, the first thing he did was praise God. What is the greatest thing we can do with our tongues? As the old hymn says: "O for a thousand tongues to sing, my great Redeemer praise, the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of His grace."

The next eleven verses elaborate on Zechariah's praise, beginning with the idea that

II. Jesus the King Would Bring Deliverance (vv. 65-75)

⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, ⁶⁶ and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him. ⁶⁷ And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, ⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people ⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; ⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

So, the big news spread outside the neighborhood. Everyone in Judea, the much larger area, was talking about it. Probably the fact that Zechariah and Elizabeth were the age of grandparents was a big part of that. And maybe the story of the angel was circulated. But I think more important than that, when people were around John, they sense something special, they felt the presence of God. Did you catch what verse 66 said, "*What then will this child be? For the hand of the Lord was with him.*" It was obvious that this child would be special, but they wondered exactly why and how. So, Zechariah answered in the form of a song or poem that verse 67 calls a prophecy.

Just as Mary's song has come to be known as the "Magnificat" because of the word "Magnify" in its first line, so Zechariah's song is known as the "Benedictus," which is Latin for the first word "Blessed." Some of the information in the song was given to him in his encounter with Gabriel, but I

think even more was revealed by the Holy Spirit. It's full of Old Testament imagery, as Zechariah, a priest, was full of Biblical knowledge. Scholars claim that there are possibly 33 images or allusions in these 13 verses.¹ He mentioned the holy prophets of old in verse 70, then our fathers (or "our ancestors" in other translations) in verse 72, and then Abraham in verse 73. He anchored his thoughts in the past, the history of Israel, but also pointed the way forward. He begins to speak of someone from the house of David. We've already heard that Zechariah and Elizabeth were from the priestly house of Levi and Aaron, not of David's line, so this cannot refer to John. He was describing Mary's baby.

What is a horn of salvation in verse 69? Is that a horn that you would blow? Maybe, but more likely it is a reference to a horn on an animal, like an ox or a bull, that is its strength when it battles. Christ would be the weapon of deliverance and salvation for God. David composed a song after being delivered from Saul that began: "*The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and **the horn of my salvation**, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior*" (2 Samuel 22:2-3).

Who are these enemies that Zechariah spoke of in verse 71: "*that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us*"? Always entangled in the idea of the Messiah was the thought that Israel would be freed from her earthly enemies: the pagan nations around her, the Romans who occupied her. And the Old Testament was full of stories of Israel's warfare and God's deliverance from human enemies. But as with all things as we move from the Old to the New Testament, from the old covenant to the new covenant, there is an emphasis on taking what is outward and tangible to what is inward and spiritual. And so the enemies that Zechariah refers to are much more likely to be Satan, his evil forces of darkness, sin, death, and hell.

It's interesting that Zechariah mentions in verses 72-73 that God would "*remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham.*" Why is that interesting? Because they've just gotten done with the ceremony that accompanied Abraham's covenant – circumcision. Through the thousands of years between Abraham's life and John's birth, the Hebrew people had circumcised their sons on the 8th day of their lives in obedience to God's command in Genesis chapter 17:9-14. This was a sign of being part of the covenant community, living under its laws and sharing its blessings. This was so serious that any males who were not circumcised were cut off from God's people for breaking the covenant. Now getting back to the oath that God swore to Abraham, where is that found? Genesis 22:16-18 comes after Abraham's obedience in taking his son, Isaac, up on the mountain as the sacrifice. "*By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of the heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.*" Promises to Abraham of offspring, deliverance, and blessing, were echoing down through the centuries and still honored and fulfilled by God.

Verses 74-75 remind us that since we are delivered from the hands of our enemies, we can serve God with complete confidence, we don't need to fear! Michael Card points out that,

"nine months earlier Zechariah had gone into the holy place with the knowledge that if he was not ritually clean, he might very well die in the temple. In the old world the emotion that predominated in the service of God was fear. In the old world you were not allowed to touch the bottom of a mountain that God was on the top of or else you would die. But Zechariah is

¹ Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Image/Doubleday, 1979), pp. 386-89.

singing a song about a new world where the condition in which one will serve God is love and faithfulness and joy.”²

Hebrews 4:16 even urges us: “*Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*” Yes, we should still fear God, in one sense: Proverbs says that’s the beginning of wisdom to have a healthy respect and awe for who He is. But we’re not scared; having a relationship through Jesus turns fear into bold faith. It’s the thought that drove Charles Wesley to write in the 4th verse of “And Can It Be”: “No condemnation now I dread, Jesus and all in Him is mine. Alive in Him, my living head, and clothed in righteousness divine. Bold I approach the eternal throne, and claim the crown through Christ my own.”

The rest of Zechariah’s Benedictus is about his son, the explanation that

III. John the Prophet Would Bring Knowledge (vv. 76-80)

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” ⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

Israel and her people had been living in what we’re told is the equivalent of sitting in darkness. The last prophet and writing of Scripture had been 400 years earlier. The whole land was now under Roman occupation, so Israel was not free to govern herself. Of course, she had given up that privilege back when her kings and the sins of the nation had provoked the Lord so much to send them into exile with the Assyrians and Babylonians. It was time for them to experience the sunrise and the light of God’s mercy and redemption. Isaiah 9:2 had prophesied that “*the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.*” “That time is now,” claimed Zechariah with the words of the song. John would be announcing it and Jesus would be fulfilling it. Jesus would tell people that, “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*” (John 8:12).

And John’s role would be to prepare people, to alert them that the light was coming. He was to point the way towards the salvation that would be accomplished. Zechariah mentions five things that are accomplished in salvation, things that were promised to the people back then and are still promised to His people today. We find support for each of them in other places in the New Testament:

1) v. 77 - We go from ignorance to knowledge (1 Corinthians 1:4-5 - “*the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge.*”)

2) v. 77 - Our sins are forgiven (Acts 10:43 - “*everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.*”)

3) v. 78 - God gives us His mercy (1 Peter 2:10 - “*Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*”)

4) v. 79 - We are brought from darkness to light (1 Peter 2:9 - “*you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*”)

5) v. 79 - We go from being God’s enemies to having peace with Him (Romans 5:10 - “*For while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life.*”)

² Michael Card, *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), p. 44.

Conclusion: He Has Visited and Redeemed His People

I want to go back for a minute to the end of verse 68: *“he has visited and redeemed his people.”* This is the Christmas story and the mission of Jesus summed up in 7 words! That word “visit” reminds us that God did not accomplish salvation by just sending angels and making grand proclamations from heaven; He actually came to His people in person. Jesus was God come in the flesh. Not just a visit to see how things were going. I’ve never watched that show “Undercover Bosses,” where the head of an organization will wear a disguise as they spend time among their workers to see how things really are going. We’re tempted to think that’s what Jesus’ time on earth was. No, there was a greater purpose in Jesus coming in the flesh, though that idea of being disguised is somewhat accurate, since Jesus’ divinity was veiled. People did not know that He was actually God until it was revealed to them. The greater purpose was to redeem His people. Sometimes Jesus’ mission is thought of as coming as a teacher, to educate people in the ways of God and His kingdom, and that is certainly true, that was part of His ministry. But if we stop there, we have a very incomplete understanding of Jesus’ mission. His teachings and His healings were all pointing to the greater purpose: to die on the cross to pay the penalty for His people’s sins. That’s what redeeming means, right? To pay a price to free someone from bondage. That someone who was in bondage was you and me, and all of humanity that God would be calling to faith in Him through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

We just sang in the “Emmanuel” song by Chris Tomlin: “What fear we felt in the silent age, four hundred years, can He be found? But broken by a baby’s cry! Rejoice in the hallowed manger ground. The Son of God, here born to bleed, a crown of thorns would pierce His brow. And we beheld this offering. Exalted now, the King of Kings, praise God for the hallowed manger ground. Emmanuel – God incarnate here to dwell.”

No wonder Zechariah’s first words after getting his speech back were praises to God. He had pondered the events that the births of these two babies would culminate in. These two cousins, John and Jesus, would be part of the greatest rescue mission ever accomplished on earth. It would come to bless a specific people, Israel, but it would also bless the whole world, offering a salvation that would be available to every sinner in every age. All of the great promises of the Scriptures would culminate in this work, and all of history after that would point back to Jesus’ mission. I’m sure that Zechariah didn’t know every detail, but he knew enough to praise His great God and tell anyone who would listen the amazing things that would be coming. Now that we are on the other side of those redemption actions, Christmas reminds us that it all happened, it all came true. Let’s thank God in our hearts and praise Him with our lips for what He has done for us! Amen.

Benediction

Philemon 6, 25

“I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”