



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Third Sunday in Advent December 16th, 2007

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

The scene is a vivid one. It was time for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Luke says it very matter of factly, yet nothing had happened like this in Israel since Sarah bore Isaac in her old age. Every infant child was considered a gift of God, and solemn promises were made and sealed up to them in the most holy rite of circumcision. We believe this rite has been displaced and replaced by the bloodless sacrament of baptism, and it is a wondrous thing when the people of God bring their infant seed to be included in the promises of the covenant.

On this day relatives were invited to be witnesses. When the angel visited Mary, Elizabeth was six months pregnant. From the fact that she stayed with her cousin for three months we can deduce she was present when John was born. She may also have been there for his naming. The protests of neighbors that no one in the family was called John must have stirred her heart. This was a gift of God in a most profound sense.

Zechariah was still unable to speak, so he took a writing tablet and wrote very simply, *His name is John*. Obedience loosened his tongue. Perhaps when Luke says that *Everyone who heard this wondered about it* he means that serious people pondered these events in a serious way. They still do. This is how we should respond to the Gospel. Think carefully and deeply about these things. They are serious and have serious consequences for your life.

Luke is very clear here. Zechariah sung these words as a prophet. In this context, the term *filled with the Spirit* means he spoke under an immediate impression and inspiration of the Spirit of God. It was a prophetic psalm he sung, beginning with the words, *Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He hath visited and redeemed his people*. The inspired priest

brings together two of the highest of the divine names--Yahweh, the God of covenant, and Elohim, the Creator and ruler of all that is. You will notice here that Zechariah does not praise God for the birth of his son, but for what it meant for the people of God. He would have taken little pleasure in miracles if they did not mean good for Jerusalem and blessing for Zion.

The vision before Zachariah is that of a victorious Davidic King, who comes into history to set His people free. *Thus*, he says in verse 72, *He has raised up a horn of salvation to show mercy to our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant, the oath He swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days*. Zechariah has Genesis 22:16-18 in mind. In that passage God swore by his own name, and the writer to the Hebrews says that it was because there was no other greater to swear by. It was an oath that tied God to his Word which consisted of two parts: one, the blessing of God that would give to Abraham a universal seed, as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sand on the shore; and, second, the possessing of the gate of his enemies.

Oh thank God this morning that all our spiritual privileges are based on the fact that God remembers His covenant. It is before Him all the time. The blood of the cross is before Him. He remembers the cross, just as surely as He remembers Abraham and the promise that through His seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. This is the basis of our assurance. For you who struggle with unresolved guilt and cannot seem to let go of the past, your salvation, the forgiveness of your sins, your hope of

eternal life is based not on anything you have done or will ever do, but on His oath.

Again, to quote from verse 74, those who are the recipients of his mercy, are *rescued from the hand of their enemies* to enable them to serve God without fear in holiness and righteousness. These terms—*holiness and righteousness*--are linked together in order to combine both the vertical and horizontal aspects of our Christian obligations. God is holy and we are to be holy too, not as much as God is, but like God is. We are to live as those who are owned by Him. Then righteousness refers to justice--righteous living in an unrighteous world. The word rendered serve in this verse emphasizes the holiness. It was used for the ministry of priests in the Temple. Our calling, my friends, is to discharge a priestly ministry in holiness and righteousness. Disentangled, you see, from the thralldom of Satan, the love of sin, and the cares of this world, we are free to serve our loving and redeeming Lord.

Zachariah may not have realized the deep truths of which he sang. But this hymn which may have begun with a political deliverance in mind soars into the highest and most glorious of strains. Speaking under the influence of the Holy Spirit the priest predicts the ministry of the prophet. He predicts his dignity and his success. John would be the prophet of the Most High. This Old Testament title was used to emphasize God's rule over all the earth. It is appropriately used here. Though John's ministry would be focused on the remnant of Israel its consequences would affect the lives of those far removed both spiritually and geographically from the shores of the Jordan.

His ministry was to go before and prepare the way. He was not the way. A day would come when he would declare of the one not yet born, *I must decrease in order that He might increase*. But his ministry would be to call his own people to a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, and thereby lead them to a saving knowledge of God, verse 77.

John would give his people the greatest gift they could ever be given, the knowledge of salvation, through the forgiveness of their sins. His would be a ministry of emancipation. He would introduce a deliverance deeper, more profound, more significant, and with much longer implications than any other kind of deliverance any political or military leader could offer them--the forgiveness of sins. Only to the degree that we have experienced this justification, this emancipation, and liberation from the penalty, power, and ultimately the presence of sin can we say

that Jesus Christ has saved us, and that we are a saved people.

In verse 78 this theme is expanded, *Zechariah speaks of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace*. Literally the *tender mercy of our God* reads, the entrails of mercy. The God of Abraham and Jesus responds to the misery of creation in mercy. He feels mercy. Deep in His triune being the living God anguishes over the consequences of sin, which is why, in grace, He resolves to bring its reign to an end.

There is something Christ offers that is infinitely more precious than silver or gold. It is stated in the final words of this song, recorded for us in verse 79. It is light in place of darkness; a light that lights up the shadows cast by the presence of death. It is also the path of peace built for our feet. This was what John was sent to proclaim. This is what the gospel of God concerning His Son continues to offer today. In place of the darkness caused by alienation from God the light of reconciliation with God has arisen. In place of the darkness of death, the gospel offers the light of life; in place of the darkness of ignorance, the light of knowledge; in place of the darkness of sin the light of salvation. Our text speaks of salvation in its widest sense. It is the complete reversal of our lost condition. The gospel brings life and immortality to light. It dispels the darkness. Indeed, the darkness of sin can only be expelled by the sun of righteousness who rises upon us with healing in His wings.

Luke finishes the chapter with a summary of John's life. *The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he lived in the desert until the day he appeared publicly to Israel*. Viktor Frankl, the Viennese psychiatrist wrote, "Project yourself on to your death bed, and think back. What, from that point of view, do you wish you had done with your life." John lived in a desert, says Luke, but how many people know his name. True fame, my friends, is when you make a difference that lasts for eternity. Shine the light of truth into the darkness where you live, so that the tender mercy of our God dawns on someone who lives in ignorance, and you will share with John a fame that will last for eternity! You will enter the glory of the God of covenant bringing your sheaves with you!

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.