

Title: Ready to bless God
Text: Luke 1.67-79
Theme: A second chance to believe
Series: Advent 2025 #2
Aim: I aim to lead my people to write out a blessing to God to share with others.

Read Text:

The traditional and popular reading of the Christmas story comes from Luke 2. However, before there was Luke 2, there was Luke 1 and Luke 1 is a massive 80 verses long and helps us understand Luke 2. After the introduction of his gospel, Luke introduces us to an older married couple; Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah means, Yahweh has remembered again and Elizabeth means “my God is the one by whom I swear” or “my god is fortune.” These two had parents who believed in God and believed God.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were faithful to God and kept the OT law, in spite of the fact that they had “nothing to show for it” in the sense that they were childless and they were beyond child-bearing years. As they say, that ship has sailed. The question of who would take care of them was a serious concern. We learn from the OT accounts that when we hear of an older couple unable to have children or a woman who was barren, that God is setting us up for turning a big page in history. E.g. Abraham/Sarah – Isaac, Hannah – Samuel, Manoah – Samson.

Zechariah was in the tribe of priests and it was his time to be in Jerusalem and serve at the Temple. He was chosen by “drawing straws” (casting lots) to go into the temple alone and burn the incense on one particular day. While he was in there, something happened that had not happened in 400 years. God spoke. The Old Testament (English versions) closed with the book of Malachi. 400 years is a long time, and yet the very story of Israel cannot be understood apart from the direct involvement of God. Zechariah was offering incense, when Gabriel, the angel of the Lord appeared standing on the right side of the altar of incense. Gabriel, as he always does, makes an announcement. His mission is to announce what God has said and his message to Zechariah has 3 parts:

- Go home and paint a room blue. You and Elizabeth are going to have a son.
- Your son is the Elijah that God promised through Malachi 400 years ago.
- Your son will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

God’s promised plan was about to unfold right in front of Zechariah in an extraordinary way and once again, God was using seemingly obscure people who were faithfully living their ordinary lives in spite of adversity and disappointment to do it. The weight and glory of this announcement was massive. The head-spinning promise that Zechariah and Elizabeth were going to be parents was drowned out by the deafening sonic-boom of who their son was going to be and who was coming after him. Thousands of years of history were aimed like arrows at this time beginning with God himself promising back in Genesis 3 that he would send the Serpent-crusher. For thousands of years, God kept previewing that promise through the lives of

people like Abel, Joseph, Moses, Boaz and David. He would provide pictures of the Messiah through the ark, the Passover, the bronze serpent, the day of atonement and the temple itself. Everything pointed to this and here was Gabriel showing Zechariah how the table had been set and everything was getting in order.

If we are reading this account understanding this background from the OT, our hearts would be racing. And then, Zechariah says, "You sure about this? It is like Zechariah was the field goal kicker who had a chance to win the game with 2 seconds left on the clock and he hooks it left. Gabriel seems stunned at his hesitation to believe what he has just been told. Gabriel does not have a category for doubting God or his Word and he famously responds to Zechariah's doubt by saying, *"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."* Zechariah is asking for a sign to assure him that this was true as if the sudden appearance of an angel in the Temple is not enough. So, Gabriel gives him a sign. Zechariah, you will not be able to speak until these things take place. Zechariah knows (and we know) beyond any doubt that God is keeping his Word, God is serious about you believing his Word and these consequences are designed to help/cause you to believe God's Word.

For 9 months Zechariah could not speak. Every morning when he woke up and could not form words or sounds would be the sign that he asked for that proved that what he experienced was real. Combine with the fact that Elizabeth was outgrowing her clothes would be a double confirmation. But Zechariah has a long time to think about what he should have said, and what he will say when he gets to, again. Gabriel said that Zechariah would speak again when his son was born, so he had a good bit of time to think about what he would say when that time came.

Malachi is the last book of the OT because Malachi is the last prophet before this new era in God's plan dawns. The sun is setting. Darkness is coming. The Word of God that had been given over and over was continually rejected and so, God stopped speaking. Like the parables that Christ would tell, the silence of God was an act of judgment since God was not giving them light. It was also an act of mercy because the Jews did not have fresh revelation to disbelieve and disobey. This was true nationally. It is true personally.

The prophecy of Malachi ends with a promise that God is going to send the prophet Elijah before the day of the Lord and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers. This is in the very last verse of the last chapter of the last book of the Old Testament. It is the last recorded promise of God. Now, for 400 years, silence. Zechariah knew this prophecy well. He was a priest. So, when Gabriel tells him that his son is that Elijah who is going to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, he should have been ready to believe and ready to affirm that. This was a massive moment in history and it was his moment and? Swing and a miss.

Many years ago, I had an opportunity to preach in a historic, highly revered setting. I knew it was an honor to do so and I sought to be prepared. Honestly, the opportunity was bigger than I was and I wasn't quite ready for it. I tried to preach the text faithfully. My intent was good, but I still had a lot to learn about preaching and since that time I've looked back on that with regret. I

can't go back and redraft the sermon and give it another shot. I have tried to learn from what was an incomplete and inadequate sermon on that day. It was good for my soul to be humbled so I could seek to keep learning. And, one of the things that I have tried to learn is to be more accurate, careful, complete, and prepared with every sermon I preach.

Zechariah had a next time and this time he was ready. He was ready because he knew there would be a next time. He knew God would keep his word. He knew his wife would give birth to a son. He knew he would name him John and he knew he would be given his voice back. This time he was ready and when his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed (v.64) he was ready to bless God. The 8th day came for the boy to be circumcised. It was a community event since this was the day when a boy would be marked as belonging to the people of Israel. It would also be the day when he would be officially named. This ceremony and his name would be recorded into the official records. The assumption was that this boy would be named Zechariah. Elizabeth said, no. He will be called John. When Zechariah was consulted, he asked for a writing tablet and wrote that his name is John. At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak. His act of faith-driven obedience gave evidence that fully believed what God had revealed and when he finally was able to speak, he was ready to bless God. And bless God, he did.

1. **Bless God!** (68-75)

When Zechariah's mouth was opened, he began blessing God and verses 68-75 is what he said. What he said, is what he had 9 months to plan to say and it is good. This declaration of praise has two parts: vs. 68-75 and vs. 76-79. In the first part, Zechariah blesses God because of 1) God's plan and 2) God's purpose. First the plan.

Bless God because he has come. *For he has visited* (68) Zechariah says this because Mary is already pregnant with the Messiah. The miracle of John's birth is only outsized by the miracle of Mary's conception. John's unlikely conception and birth is a preview of the humanly impossible conception of Jesus. These two events happening are evidence that God has come! The longed-for Messiah has come. The darkness is being shattered. The light is dawning. The page is turning. It is here.

Bless God because he has come to redeem. *And redeemed his people* (68) Zechariah knows that the coming of the Messiah is going to bring a redemption (think: buying back what rightfully belongs to him). Boaz, kinsman redeemer. Hosea, covenant redeemer of his unfaithful wife are just two stories in the history of God's people that help them understand what the Messiah will do for them. He will make things right. He will love and pay the price to get his lover. What a promise!

Bless God because he has kept his promises. *As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets* (70) Zechariah's blessing, like Mary's prayer/song is full of OT passages. For hundreds of years God has been posting billboards that have been announcing this event. And now, it is here.

When Peter Jackson started to make Tolkein's Lord of the Rings books into movies, my family was so excited. We had read the books and we could not wait. We counted down the days for them to be released and when they opened in theaters, we were there. I remember how much we anticipated this and how almost giddy we were. What Zechariah is talking about is on a completely different level. God's plan for this world goes through Israel and that plan is going right through this home and right through this little crib where this little newborn boy is now residing after what appeared to be an impossible conception. John! He is not the Messiah but he is both a promise and proof that the Messiah is close at hand, just like the prophets said.

Bless God because he will save us (71, 74) Zechariah sees spiritual salvation and political salvation as being tied together. He simply reflects what the Jews believed that the Messiah would do. What is hard to imagine at this point in the story is what actually happened and that is, the people of God (Jews) turned out to reject the Messiah who could save them. They only wanted political salvation, not spiritual redemption. So, they rejected the Messiah and killed him. Yet, in their killing of him, his death became the means of life. The death of Christ purchased the salvation of everyone who would believe on him. So, the Messiah did come and he did redeem his people, but the people he redeemed ended up being more Gentile than Jew. But, the plan of God for the Jews is not done.

In the OT, God's desire was for Israel to live in such a compelling way that they would attract the nations to believe in God. Now, it is our turn, as believers from those nations to live in such a compelling way that the Jews come to faith in the Messiah for the world who came from them. He wasn't just their Messiah, he was for everyone who would believe.

All of the reasons that Zechariah had to bless God; because he has come, because he has come to redeem, because he has kept his promises, and because he will save us are for a purpose. In fact, Zechariah speaks of two related purposes (v.71, 74). The Messiah brings salvation not simply to rescue his people, but in rescuing people he displays his mercy and he displays his faithfulness to his covenant. God is merciful and God keeps his promises! But there is another purpose. Look at v.74. In order that we being delivered from the hand of our enemies might serve God without fear (of our enemies) in holiness, and righteousness all the days of our lives. The Messiah's salvation is not primarily a political salvation but a salvation that rescues us, frees us, empowers us to serve God in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

This is fascinating. The idea of being before God is frightening because of the holiness and righteousness of God. The sacrificial system and the structure of the tabernacle and temple were designed to keep the sinner away from God so that the sinner would not be consumed. The sacrifices that were offered were done to pay for the sins of the people so that they would not have to pay for their sins with their lives. But this salvation that the Messiah is bringing is going to pay for their sins in such a way that the very people saved by the Messiah would be able to serve God in holiness and righteousness and do this before God all of their days. The Messiah is bringing a salvation that the world and Israel have never conceived of yet.

2. See your part in the BIG plan. (76-79)

The first section of this blessing is overwhelming in its scope. But this section (76-79) is overwhelming in its personal connection. I love the Sundays of Advent. I love the significance of the candles that remind us that no matter how dark the world was and is, that God has sent his light, his Word and his Son as the Light of the World into this world. There are parents now, who were kids who walked the candles in. They knew what it meant but now they know even more. The light that represents God's Word, God's truth, that points to God's Son is our hope. It is our only hope and it is our great hope. I know this is true for us as a church and as a people but I know that it is also true for each kid who carries that candle in. The light from God's Word that you are representing is your light and your hope. I know that your days will not be easy, and your life will face adversity. But there is a Savior who has come. I love that our kids participate like this, but I pray for them to believe in Christ from their hearts. The coming of Christ is big and it is personal.

Zechariah at this point directs his words and I'm assuming his eyes to his son. He may have held him in his arms and because he talks directly to him even as he talks about him. Zechariah is a new dad, but he is not a young dad. Young dads assume they will see their boys roll over, say their first words, learn to crawl and take their first steps. Young dads assume they will teach their boys to throw a ball and catch it, kick a soccer ball, play golf, and get their hearts broken by the Lions. Zechariah knew that he would not likely be around to see his boy become a man. Zechariah also had many more miles on his odometer. He knew that the world his son was born into was a dark and needy one. I doubt that he heard him deliver his first sermon or live long enough to see the thousands of people who would go into the desert to hear him preach. I would think that Zechariah thought of all of these things, but what he will miss is not his focus. He is overwhelmed by the part he has been called to play and now the part his son is going to have. Yes, it is a dark world, but it is not without hope, nor abandoned by God and my son has a part to play and I am all in.

John, you are going to be a prophet of God. You are not the Messiah but will go before him in order to prepare the way for him. You will get to be the announcer of the greatest news that anyone could ever hear. That because of the tender mercy of our God, he has come. The Son has risen. The Light has come. Salvation and forgiveness are here. Our days of darkness and living in the shadow of death are over. The true light is here.

Zechariah had to be absolutely overwhelmed at the thought that his son, this baby, prophesied about 400 years before by Malachi was here, in his arms. It was happening. God was keeping his promise and he was in it.

Conclusion:

Be ready to speak for God and about God and know that is your part in his BIG plan.