

December 15, 2024

Luke 1:57-80

Last time we saw Zachariah, he was in rough shape. Zachariah was a priest in Jerusalem serving in God's temple, and that means he was a professional talker. He was constantly teaching people about God, publicly praying, and singing Psalms at the temple. That was his job. And for the first time years, he has to be quiet and listen. The angel Gabriel came to him and told him that God was going to give him and his wife a baby boy who would be a great prophet- a beautiful promise- and Zachariah says, "No. Not possible. We're too old." - As if God couldn't easily work around that. He's been the teacher of God's truth for so long, he knows what's possible and impossible! And unless it makes sense to him and what he thinks God can do, then it's not possible. He needs to learn, and in order for him to learn, he needs to stop talking. So that's what God has happen- for 9 months. Zachariah can't speak for 9 months. All he can do is listen as he hears God's word preached to him every week in the synagogue. All he can do is watch as elderly wife does become pregnant just like Gabriel said. All he can do is sit and reflect on what it is God is doing right now, what Gabriel meant that his Son would be the prophet that came before God himself, what it meant to be to truly be a follower of this God.

Finally, Elizabeth gives birth to the baby boy, and finally, Zachariah is allowed to speak. After not being able to talk or sing or pray out loud for 9 months, what would you expect? "Wow, God! Really? That was harsh! I get it! I'm supposed to trust you. You didn't have to do all that!" But he doesn't. He's thankful. He says, "Blessed be our God, for he has visited his people." And that word, "visited," is fascinating. Literally, that word means, "He has overseen," or "supervised," or "looked upon" us. The idea is that God has come in a special, unique, powerful way. And the rest of Zechariah's poetry tells us what that means. The good news of Jesus Christ according to Zechariah- **When God Comes Near, 1. He Defeats Your True Enemies, 2. He Restores You To What You Were Meant To Be, 3. He Does It All By Grace.**

**1. He Defeats Your True Enemies.** In the Old Testament, Israel was always surrounded by enemies- Philistines, Edomites, Moabites, and all kinds of small nations that wanted nothing more than to pillage and enslave them. As the years went on, the big international superpowers of the ancient world subjugated Israel from 700's BC all the way to the time of Jesus- and at this time it was the Roman Empire that had invaded and ruled over the Jews- the Jews hadn't actually been independent for more than 700 years. They had a lot of enemies! And Zachariah praises God because he has come, and he has "raised a horn" of salvation- what does that mean? When a ram or elk or any animal with horns or antlers asserts their dominance or wins a battle, they use their horns or antlers. So this "horn" of Salvation is going to be someone God is going to use to defeat their enemies. So, does that mean that Jesus, who Zechariah is talking about- still in Mary's womb at the time, went and gathered followers and ambushed the Roman soldiers and led a military campaign? No. But most people at this time, when they would have heard that Jesus was going to save them from their enemies, were thinking about their political enemies, but

Zachariah isn't talking about that. And because Jesus' people didn't actually understand what enemies Jesus came to defeat, they didn't understand him.

The same is true today. The reason most don't understand Jesus is that they don't understand their true enemies. *Do you know yours?* Your biggest enemies in life are not conservatives or liberals. It's not the president, current or future. It's not your boss, it's not the "elites." It's not Iran or Russia or Hamas or any physical group of people. The biggest, most pervasive issue in your life and culture is not inequality, or lack of family values. Your biggest, most destructive enemy, which has the potential and desire to do the most damage and harm to you, and the gravest threat to society, is you and me. Jesus says, out of the heart come all kinds of evil. You are your biggest enemy. I am my biggest, most destructive enemy. Our selfish desires, our greed, our envy, our lust, our gossip, our inability to love and empathize and cherish each other, that is what causes the most damage in our lives and what will cause the most damage in the next life- because God wants one thing from us- our love- and we as human beings are not willing to give that to him. We are the problem! And Satan, his demons, and the sinful world- other sinners, only made that problem worse as they get us to believe lies and continue to rebel against God and hurt each other and lie and lust and disobey. The enemies that we need Jesus to defeat are not political or social- they are spiritual. And they keep us from being and doing what God created for- and that is why Jesus is coming- to restore you.

**2. He Restores You.** One of you made the excellent point to me that I'm going to share with everyone- what was Adam doing before he and Eve fell into sin? What did God create him for? God created the Garden of Eden, the perfect paradise with no sin, no death, no sadness, all for Adam and Eve to work, to labor, to find satisfaction in working- in fact, God let Adam name all the animals. God has made us creative beings to use our gifts to serve each other and glorify him- that's what God created us for! And Adam and Eve ruined it all by disobeying God, serving themselves instead. And isn't that what's wrong with the world? Isn't that what it all comes down to? People have gifts and abilities, but they use their gifts to serve themselves, not each other. Why would companies ruthlessly lay off people without warning just to make a few bucks? Why would someone murder a CEO of an insurance company, a father and husband? Just to make a political point and set himself up to be a martyr. How can people callously cheer that on? Because they themselves and anyone who cheers for that is just as callous, just as selfish, just as greedy and values human life just as little as any Health Insurance Company that overcharges and cuts people off from necessary care. It's all selfishness! And God made us to be so much more- as Zachariah says- to serve God in holiness and righteousness without fear! Think about this! It's not just being unselfish and doing the right thing- but serving God and neighbor with perfect love and selflessness- that's what we were made for- and to do so without fear. But can we?

Sure, human beings are capable of doing good- but why? Why do most people do good things or avoid bad things? Is it because they are genuinely filled with love and selfless care for others? Or is it because it will make them feel or look good? And why would that matter- looking good? Because we care about what others think of us, we care about what God thinks of us, and we think if we do good things and avoid bad things God will spare us. That's not love. That's fear. That's not what God made us for. So how can we serve God and neighbor in love without fear like God wants?

**3. God's Grace.** At this point, I'm afraid most of us would then assume, "Okay, well if I and my sinful desires are the problem, and the solution is that I serve God and my neighbor selflessly, then I will go ahead and do that. I'll do better." But that's not what Zachariah is saying. He then looks at his baby son and says, "And *you*, child will be a prophet of God- he's going to bring people back to God. How? Through the truth." Christianity isn't advice on how to do better- it's truth- that we can't do better and even if we did, we still wouldn't be good enough for God's standard and we desperately need not advice, but forgiveness. And in order for that to happen, Jesus had to die in our place. That's the message- we are perfect, saved by God, saved from the consequences of our sin, our selfishness, not by what we've done, but by what Jesus has done for us. And why did Jesus choose to save us? Did God look down on us and think, "well, they have a spark of goodness, let's save them." No- Zechariah says it's all the tender mercy of God. The literal word means, "the bowels, the guts" of God. When you feel pity for someone, you see a helpless person and you feel bad for them, you often feel that in your stomach. That's what he's talking about- God saw us, rebellious, doomed to die, and instead rightfully hating us, he had compassion on us and decided that he would punish his own son in our place and forgive us for everything. Do you know what that means?

People have a lot of ideas about how Christianity works. I think if I were to ask most people, they would say Christianity is like a child trying to tie his shoe, but he can't quite get it right, and Jesus comes and helps him out- and if you ask Jesus into your life, he'll help you tie your proverbial shoe and you can live a happier, more fulfilling, more selfless life. But that's not how the Bible speaks- it's more like this. An addict. A junkie. Someone in the darkness of their own desires and they can't help themselves. Another hit. Another high. Another step further into madness. Some of us know what that's like and how dark that is. Walking in darkness. Angry. Miserable. Self obsessed and self-loathing at the same time. Hating my darkness and at the same time petrified of any kind of light that would expose me. I like my darkness. It's cold, rotten, and terrible, but it's mine. I'm not saved, and I don't want to be. And suddenly, without my permission, a savior enters my personal hell and exposes me for what I really am and how many people I've hurt. But instead of hurting me like a deserve, he clothes me, he feeds me as if I were his son and promises that I will be, no matter what. And the light breaks through and begins to heal and change me. Sin makes us all addicts and criminals. And out of his mercy God takes on the punishment we deserve and declares us to be his children- nothing to earn- and in doing so,

defeats our worst enemies, ourselves, and redeems us and every day forms us into who he's called us to be. And Zechariah, as he holds his baby boy, knows that God is going to use his John to prepare people for this.

This is my final point. God prepares you for himself often through your worst experiences and failures. That was the whole point with John the Baptist- he was a fiery preacher telling everyone to repent- to actually consider how selfish and evil they are and realize how desperate they are in need of God's mercy! And then, their hearts would be prepared for the grace of God. See, Jesus dying on the cross for you doesn't make much difference if you don't think you need it. If you've convinced yourself that you are a relatively righteous person, and you don't really need all that much from God, then Jesus' grace won't be that important to you. You don't need it! That's why God sends Johns- and other things in your life to wake you up and help you realize how desperately in need you are of Jesus' mercy, and when you realize that it's all yours, you can have true joy. Don't avoid looking deeply at your own heart. Don't ignore or excuse your darkness. Admit that you are your own worst enemy. And in doing so, you will come to know just how much Jesus loved you- that just as you are- he chose to make you his own. Amen.