

“Dawning” (Zechariah’s Song)

“The people who live in darkness have seen a great light,
and for those living in the land of the shadow of death,
a light has dawned” (Matthew 4:16).

Luke 1:68-75 ¹

As I’ve told you before, I’ve always wanted to be a tenor and to be a morning person; but I doubt very much that either is to be. No one in my family is a morning person. We once had a set of Snoopy glasses that said, “Morning people are hard to love!”

These days, I don’t believe anyone on our staff is a morning person, either. I believe I could get an “Amen!” if I were to quote these lines from John Donne at one of our staff meetings: “Busy old fool, unruly sun, why dost thou thus, through windows and through curtains call on us?”²

At the same time, I do occasionally see the sunrise. Many were the mornings long ago when I saw the sun rise majestically over the boundless sea; and even now, as the sun rises over my little place in the Sierra Villas, I often think of Horatio’s famous lines from Hamlet, “But look, the morn, in russet mantle clad, walks o’er the dew of yon high eastward hill.”³

We’ll come back to the dawn later; but on this CHRISTmas Eve morning, our focus is on the second of the four canticles in the CHRISTmas Story. One definition of a “canticle” is that it is a hymn, psalm, or other song of praise taken from a biblical text other than the Psalms, and so these four are.

The four CHRISTmas canticles are:

1. Mary’s Song, the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-56);
2. Zechariah’s Song, the *Benedictus* (Luke 1:67-79);
3. The Angels’ Song, *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* (Luke 2:14); and
4. Simeon’s Song, the *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29-32).

We looked at Mary’s Song two weeks ago, and this morning, we turn to Zechariah’s Song.

You may remember that Zechariah was a priest, married to Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary, who would become the mother of Jesus. And you may remember that Zechariah and Elizabeth were to become the parents of a boy we know as John the Baptist.

You’ll recall that the angel, Gabriel, had appeared to Zechariah as he served in the Temple, announcing that he and Elizabeth were going to have a son, even though they were far past the normal ages for childbearing. And when Zechariah disbelieved this announcement, Gabriel told him that because of his disbelief, he would be mute until the child was born.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 24, 2017. The fourth Sunday of Advent.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Luke,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953); Vinson, Richard, “Luke,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008); Bock, Darrell, “Luke,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); Malcolm Tolbert, “Luke,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Leifeld, Walter, “Luke,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Craddock, Fred, “Luke,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version; Nolland, John, “Luke,” *Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1989).

² John Donne, “The Sun Rising.”

³ William Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” Act 1, Scene 1, page 8.

As we come to the text this morning, a little more than nine months have passed, and, beginning at what we know as Luke 1:57, Luke tells us that neighbors and relatives have gathered for the circumcision and naming of Zechariah and Elizabeth's little son. While Elizabeth had doubtless been calling him John since his birth—one commentator noted that we have no reason to think she had been calling him Roscoe—it was the custom to formally name sons at their circumcision, which took place on the eighth day.⁴

In that culture, as in our own, it was customary to name children after someone else in the family—I am named after my father and grandfather—and the neighbors and relatives expected that to be the case here, too. Since Zechariah was still mute, they asked Elizabeth what the boy's name would be; and when she said, "John," they were so thunderstruck that they turned to his father, who wrote on a tablet, "His name is John."

Suddenly, at that very moment, Zechariah's tongue was loosed, and he began to praise God with great energy. This was quite a shock to those present. After this extremely unlikely pregnancy, after this completely unexpected name, and now, after the instantaneous recovery of Zechariah's speech, the crowd became both flummoxed and fearful. "*What then will this child become?*" they asked.

Luke tells us that Zechariah was "filled with the Holy Spirit," making him the fourth person in the Gospel to be so filled (after Elizabeth, Mary, and the infant John), and it is in this flush of inspiration that Zechariah speaks what we know as "Zechariah's Song," or "the Benedictus."

Like Mary's Song, Zechariah's Song is rather elaborately worked out to be extemporaneous. Perhaps he composed it later and Luke got a copy of it; but, like Mary, Zechariah had had plenty of silent time in which to collect his thoughts, and it's also true that when we are under the inspiration of God's Spirit, we can do things we can't usually do. So there it is.

Before we look at the Song itself, it's worth noting that while Zechariah did experience God's discipline for his previous unbelief, he has apparently learned and grown during the intervening months, and he is now restored to God's purposes. Zechariah's story is a story of grace after judgment, and that's a hopeful word for us all.⁵

Before we examine Zechariah's Song, let's experience it. You have it on the insert in your worship order, but right now, I invite you to just listen to this poem of praise and thanksgiving:

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸ Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and provided redemption for his people. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰ just as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets in ancient times; ⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of those who hate us.

⁷² He has dealt mercifully with our fathers and remembered his holy covenant—⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham. He has given us the privilege, ⁷⁴ since we have been rescued from the hand of our enemies, to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness in his presence all our days.

⁴ Genesis 17:9-14, 12:4; Leviticus 12:1-3.

⁵ Zechariah's Song is the last we hear of either him or Elizabeth in the New Testament story.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ Because of our God's merciful compassion, the dawn from on high will visit us ⁷⁹ to shine on those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Isn't that beautiful? The Song breaks naturally into two sections, the first having to do with the coming of God's promised Messiah, and the second having to do with the promised forerunner of Messiah. The Messiah, the Anointed One, the Heir to David's throne, was of course, Jesus, Mary's Son. And the forerunner, the promised "Elijah,"⁶ was Zechariah's own son, to whom he spoke these words.

Gabriel's announcement to Mary began the inauguration of the Messianic Age through two miraculous births. Mary's Song celebrates Messiah's birth; and Zechariah's Song celebrates the birth of the Messianic Forerunner.

Zechariah's Song also brings the two themes, the two births, and the two sons together by referring to many themes in the Old Testament, only a few of which I will mention now. I've identified a number of those references in the table on the handout, should you wish to look them up. Let's look at the table one cell at a time

*⁶⁸ Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has visited and provided redemption for his people.⁷*

Notice that the Song frequently uses what is known as "the prophetic perfect" (aorist) tense, describing things that God is now doing or will shortly do in the past tense, as though they have already happened. God will indeed provide redemption, but that redemption is just dawning as this Song is sung.

There is a poignancy to Zechariah's emphasis on God's "visiting" God's people, which happens at both the beginning and the end of his Song (vv. 68, 78). Later, in Luke 19, Jesus will weep over Jerusalem, foretelling its destruction, "*because you did not recognize the time when God visited you*" (19:44). This destruction had already taken place when Luke wrote, so his readers would have seen the irony in these words.

*⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ just as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets⁸ in ancient times;
⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of those who hate us.⁹*

In the next section, Zechariah spoke of a "horn of salvation," which was a familiar metaphor for strength, as in the strength of a bull or a ram. When he spoke about "salvation from our enemies," Zechariah was talking about the Roman Empire; but he spoke much more than he knew. The strong Savior God had sent would indeed bring salvation and rescue from "the hand of those who hate us," but the real battle would be fought against invisible enemies in the spirit world (Luke 11:14-23).

⁶ Isaiah 40:3-4; Malachi 3:1-2, 4:5-6; Matthew 17:12; Mark 9:13.

⁷ Genesis 21:1; Exodus 4:31; Psalm 106:4.

⁸ This is the first time that the Hebrew prophets are called "holy."

⁹ Deuteronomy 33:17; 1 Samuel 2:10; 2 Samuel 22:3; Psalm 106:10, 132:17.

⁷² *He has dealt mercifully with our fathers and remembered his holy covenant—
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham. He has given us the privilege,
⁷⁴ since we have been rescued from the hand of our enemies, to serve him without fear
⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness in his presence all our days.¹⁰*

The covenant with Abraham was God's promise that Abraham's descendants would become a great nation through which God would bless the whole world. Notice that the goal of God's covenant was not national sovereignty and glory. This was not a "Make Israel Great Again" kind of promise. God's purpose was—and is—to create a redeemed people from every tribe, language, people, and nation who serve God freely, fearlessly, and forever (Revelation 7:9). That's why the central theme of Jesus' teaching would be the inauguration of the Kingdom of God.

⁷⁶ *And you, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.¹¹*

Now, as the second part of the Song begins, Zechariah speaks, not of Messiah, but to his little son; and his language clearly identifies little John with "the Elijah who is to come." Malachi, the last of the prophets, had written that "*I am going to send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes*" (Malachi 4:5); and even today, Jewish folk still set a place for Elijah at their Passover tables.

But just as Jesus told Jerusalem that it would be destroyed because it did not recognize God when He visited them, so He said of John, "*I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they didn't recognize him. On the contrary, they did whatever they pleased to him. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands*" (Matthew 17:12).

⁷⁸ *Because of our God's merciful compassion, the dawn from on high will visit us
⁷⁹ to shine on those who live in darkness and the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.¹²*

And so we come once more to "dawning," and to our place in this Story, because when Luke wrote about "those who live in darkness," he was thinking about us Gentiles—of which he himself was one. But it is not only Gentiles who live in darkness. In the text that we read earlier from Matthew 4:12-17, Matthew referred to Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah 9:1-2, where for the Jews, also, "*The people who live in darkness have seen a great light, and for those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.*"

Zechariah was probably also thinking of Malachi's dawning promise that "*for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings*" (Malachi 4:2). And Jesus would later say, "*As long as I am in the world, **I am the light of the world***" (John 9:5).

But once more, there is irony and sorrow in Zechariah's Song that he did not intend. There would indeed be a glorious Light, but few in Israel would come to its radiance. There would indeed be a call to walk in the Way of Peace, but there would be few takers. Long ago, and still today, we humans have a hard time letting God be God and letting God act in ways that do not fit our expectations.

¹⁰ Genesis 12:1-3, 22:16-18; Exodus 2:24; Leviticus 26:42; Deuteronomy 7:9; 1 Kings 8:23; Psalm 105:45; Malachi 4:5-6.

¹¹ Isaiah 40:4, 42:7; Malachi 3:1-2, 4:5-6.

¹² Numbers 24:17; Isaiah 9:2, 11:1-10, 60:2-3; Malachi 4:2.

One of the things I hope you see from this quick overview is how little we can understand in the New Testament if we do not know the Older Testament well. We cannot perceive prophetic fulfillment if we do not know the prophecy being fulfilled.

The early Christians were convinced that the God whom Jesus revealed was the same God as the God revealed to Israel, and that there was both connection and coherence between God's activity in the Old Testament and God's activity in the person of Jesus. Those early Christians were also convinced that Jesus was God's ultimate self-revelation, and they realized that we really had had very little idea of what God was like until Jesus came.

Jesus Himself told us that ***"If you have seen me, you have seen the Father. The Father and I are One"*** (John 10:30, 14:9). The message of the New Testament is that Jesus is the lens through whom we understand all that God has done, is doing, and will yet do. **Jesus is the Key.**

Well, as we come to the end of Zechariah's Song and of Zechariah's story, there are four things I hope you remember:

1. We are Called to Lifelong Transformation. The first thing to remember is that while Zechariah was probably in his sixties, and though he missed some cues along the way, he was still teachable. He was a lifelong learner. It's awfully easy for those of us who have been in the Church for decade after decade to put spiritual growth on cruise control and no longer strive toward more complete spiritual transformation. But the journey to which we are called is lifelong.

2. Our House, too, is Made of Glass. Because we have the benefit of hindsight, it's pretty easy for us to think of ourselves as more faithful followers of Jesus than some of those who first heard His teaching; but we do well to remember that "people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

"*Love your enemies,*"¹³ we say . . . provided that we don't see them as threats to national security. "*Give to those who ask,*"¹⁴ Jesus told us, but surely He didn't mean *actual beggars*—that what the United Way is for. "*Lend, expecting nothing in return,*"¹⁵ Jesus taught, but He *had* to be talking about books or cups of sugar, because there's no way on God's green earth that He could expect us to opt out of money-making investments! Yep, lots of glass here. Zechariah was not the last person to balk at the shape of God's Good News.

3. Pay Attention to Who Gets the Glory. John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, would eventually have quite a following, and he faced the very real temptation to elevate himself instead of the One whose way he prepared. But even under such temptation, John kept his head, saying of Jesus, "*He must increase, but I must decrease*" (John 3:30).¹⁶

Jack MacGorman, one of my teachers, often said that "There is no limit to what God can accomplish through your life, so long as you do not touch the glory." He also said that "No one can at one and the same time leave the impression that he himself is clever and that Jesus

¹³ Matthew 5:44.

¹⁴ Matthew 5:42.

¹⁵ Luke 6:35.

¹⁶ And Jesus would say of John, "*among those born of women, no one greater than John the Baptist has appeared*" (Matthew 11:11).

Christ is mighty to save.” When you listen to preachers on TV, in church, or anywhere else, pay attention to who is getting the glory. And when you talk about yourself, pay attention, too.

4. Our Radiance comes from Reflecting God’s Glory. Finally, because God’s merciful compassion, the Dawn from On High, has come also to us, we, too, are called to “shine on those who live in darkness and the shadow of death.” We are called to a lifelong journey of Joy and Witness, guided by Him who is “*the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star*” (Revelation 22:16).

My friends, if we follow Him who is The Way, we will never be lost. If we follow Him who is Truth, we will never be deceived. And if we follow Him who is Life, we will never die (John 14:6). “*I am the Light of the world,*” Jesus told us. “*Anyone who follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life*” (John 8:12).

The Dawn has come. Let your hearts rejoice!

Zechariah's Song (The *Benedictus*; Luke 1:67-79)

Text	Old Testament allusions & Notes
<p><i>67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:</i></p>	
<p><i>68 Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and provided redemption for his people.</i></p>	<p>Genesis 21:1; Exodus 4:31; Psalm 106:4</p>
<p><i>69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, 70 just as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets in ancient times; 71 salvation from our enemies and from the hand of those who hate us.</i></p>	<p>Deuteronomy 33:17; 1 Samuel 2:10; 2 Samuel 22:3; Psalm 106:10, 132:17; see also Psalms 34 and 103</p>
<p><i>72 He has dealt mercifully with our fathers and remembered his holy covenant—⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham. He has given us the privilege, ⁷⁴ since we have been rescued from the hand of our enemies, to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness in his presence all our days.</i></p>	<p>Genesis 12:1-3, 22:16-18; Exodus 2:24; Leviticus 26:42; Deuteronomy 7:9; 1 Kings 8:23; Psalm 105:45; Malachi 4:5-6</p>
<p><i>76 And you, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.</i></p>	<p>Isaiah 40:4, 42:7; Malachi 3:1-2, 4:5-6</p>
<p><i>78 Because of our God's merciful compassion, the dawn from on high will visit us ⁷⁹ to shine on those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.</i></p>	<p>Numbers 24:17; Isaiah 9:2, 11:1-10, 60:2-3; Malachi 4:2</p>