



Luke 1:67-80
Christmas: Fake News?
Praiseworthy News

Rev. Brian North
December 23rd, 2018

Quick poll, with a show of hands: Have you ever received some good news where your first response was, “Praise God!” or “Praise the Lord” or something like that? Ever experienced that? Many of us have. Sometimes we respond that way a little mindlessly, perhaps...it becomes something that rolls off our tongue without really thinking about the depth and true meaning of what we’re saying. But we all have undoubtedly had a number of times in life where we’ve received news that caused us to praise God.

On March 18, 1997, at the top of the Sun Valley ski resort, I asked Gwen if she would marry me. She said “yes” – though you probably already figured that part out. It was great news. And I don’t even really recall what I said in response, but it would not surprise me at all if I said, “Praise the Lord.” Gwen probably then said, “Help me, God! I said, ‘yes’ to a ski bum!” Other news we might get in our life that causes us to praise God could be the birth of a baby, getting a dream job, running into someone unexpectedly, and of course: the airplane you’re on landing safely.

There are a lot of different kinds of news we get in our lives that might cause us to praise God. And that’s what we’re looking at today: Praiseworthy News. We’ve been in a series of messages the last few weeks where we are tying together the news about the birth of Jesus and different kinds of news we get in our lives and how we then respond, and we’re looking at this in the light of our current culture where “fake news” is all around us. So today is news that makes us want to give thanks and praise to God.

Now last week, Zechariah got some news that we looked at last week, when the angel Gabriel visited him and told him his prayers were answered, and he and his wife Elizabeth would conceive and have a baby boy. And Zechariah is to name him, “John.” Even though this had been their prayer to have a baby, and the angel was telling him that his prayers had been heard and would be answered, and so this was all really good news, even with all that: Zechariah didn’t believe it. He doubted. That was our theme last week: doubtful news. And because he doubted, the angel Gabriel made him mute

until the birth of his son. He couldn't speak for nine months.

Fast-forward through those nine months, and in the verses before the passage we're about to read, we come to the birth of John. And everyone wants to know what his name will be. Here's what we then read, **“He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, ‘His name is John.’ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God” (Luke 1:63-64).**

Now, if the narrative on the birth of John kind of ended there, and Luke moved on, we might wonder, “Why was Zechariah praising God?” Was it because John was born? Or was it because he could finally speak again? Both? Something else? Well, today's passage helps answer that, because the narrative of John's birth doesn't end right there. So grab a Bible from in front of you, or your own if you brought one, and open to Luke 1:67, as we start there and read 14 verses this morning that help us understand what his praise was all about.

Scripture Passage Here – Luke 1:67-80

So let's dive right into the passage and pull some things out that apply to our lives. **First, we see that Zechariah praised God, but it wasn't because of his own condition getting fixed.** He wasn't going to make the same mistake twice, and bring the focus on himself. Because that's what he did before, when he doubted Gabriel: he made Gabriel's promise of what God would do, all about himself and his wife, instead. As I mentioned a moment ago, Gabriel told him, “Hey, your prayer has been answered, and you're going to give birth, and this boy is going to do great things for God.” And Gabriel's response was, “Are you sure? We're too old.” In doing that, he made it all about his and his wife's limitations. **Zechariah was still trying to make himself and his wife the solution to the problem.** We don't know how long they'd been married, but Zechariah says they're old, so presumably they've been married quite a number of years. Gwen and I've been married 21 years, and I'm not old, so let's say they've been married at least 22 years. Next year, if we look at this again, we'll say they were married at least 23 years. Some of you might prefer a little bigger number than that, even. Of course, they

could have gotten married at a little older age than might have been typical, too. But however long they were married, they hadn't been able to conceive yet, and Zechariah continues to let that past be how he envisions the future, and as a result he focuses on themselves, and not on God.

Zechariah completely discounts what God can do. That's back when Gabriel makes the announcement. And so *here*, in today's passage, as his mouth is finally open and he's able to speak again after 9 months, and John is born...notice, he doesn't say, "Praise the Lord! I can finally talk again!" Because the last time he spoke and made it about himself, he got shut up for 9 months. He's not going to do that again. **Zechariah realizes that he isn't the point of what God is doing.** Zechariah is a *vehicle* and a *vessel* through whom *God* is working; this isn't really about him. This has much more to do about John...But even John isn't the end game in what God is doing, either. John is here to point people to, and prepare people for, the coming of Jesus, the long-expected Messiah.

And all of this is praiseworthy news for Zechariah! He bursts into this prophetic word with this opening words, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come and redeemed His people." That's not really a prophesy about John, but about Jesus. In fact, the whole first half of his prophecy is about what God is going to do in Jesus, because God is faithful. Remember now, prophetic words are usually spoken in the past tense, even though it's about what God is doing right now, or will do in the future. So that can be a little confusing. It's spoken with this sense of it already being completed. That's how sure and certain it is to happen, that it can be spoken of as though it already *has* happened.

And there are three specific things that He praises God for in this prophetic word, and through this we get news about who God is. We see these things elsewhere in Scripture too, but Zechariah helps remind us of these characteristics of God. **First, we see that God is a God of redemption. "He has come and redeemed His people" (v. 68).** To "redeem" something is to "compensate for the faults or bad aspects" of something, or "gain or regain possession of something in exchange for payment."¹ Certainly, as he says this, he has in mind the big picture: the redemption of the nation of Israel.

And so he says that God has come and redeemed his people. This is what God will do through Jesus, the one in whom God comes. Jesus covers and compensates for our sins – our bad aspects and our faults. And through Jesus’ death on the cross, God makes payment to regain His people...to possess them once again. It’s the fulfillment of the sacrifice that God asked for in the Old Testament, to atone for the people’s sins. Jesus fulfills that once and for all. And this is why we Christians put so much emphasis on Jesus: He’s the one who redeems us, who covers over our sins, who compensates for all the ways in which we fall short of the glory of God, and He’s paid the price so that God might possess us, be in relationship with us...and we live into that redemption when we walk in relationship with God and trust Jesus, and worship the Lord our God, and so forth. So God redeems us.

The second thing we are reminded about God here is that He remembers us (v. 72). God does not forget about us...He remembers us. Now, verse 72 says that he remembers his *covenant*. But His covenant is with Abraham and extends to all who come after him who are in relationship with God their Creator. So for God to remember His covenant *is* for God to remember His people. We see this “remembering” expressed throughout Scripture and in our lives. One of my favorite Psalms is Psalm 103. It has a number of lines in it that are well-known. Near the middle of it are these verses, that remind us that God remembers us:

- ¹³ As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;
¹⁴ for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.
¹⁵ The life of mortals is like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the field;
¹⁶ the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.
¹⁷ But from everlasting to everlasting
the LORD’s love is with those who fear him.

I use those words at the start of probably 80% of the Memorial Services I lead. The Lord’s love is with those who fear him, and this is contrasted with our place on earth which doesn’t remember us any more when we breathe our last. God does remember us. His love stays with us. When we feel like God

has left us or remembered us no more, our feelings are betraying us from the truth of the matter. God always remembers us.

The third thing we are reminded about God here is that He rescues us.

Zechariah says in verse 74 that God has come to rescue them from the hands of their enemies. This “rescuing” might feel like it’s redundant with his “redeeming,” and they are certainly related. But they really are opposite sides of the same coin. When God redeems us – when he pays the price for us – it’s really about what God gets through that redemption. For instance, my kids will sometimes give as gifts coupons for their services of cleaning the house, or giving me a shoulder rub or something like that. When I redeem that coupon to get the shoulder rub or the clean house, I’m the one who benefits. At least in theory. Cleaning the house is really hard for my kids, gift or otherwise. When God redeems us through the payment of Jesus’ shed blood on the cross, God benefits. We are what He gets.

But when God rescues us: *we* benefit. A couple summers ago my kids were swimming at a pool and another kid there started having some troubles in a part of the pool that was over her head. And the Lifeguard jumped in and rescued her. Who benefited from that rescue? The child did. And it’s the same with us when God rescues us. We benefit. We’re brought to safety and pulled away from our sin and its effects and consequences. That’s God’s rescuing work.

So we see here in this prophetic word from Zechariah that God redeems, he remembers, and he rescues. And all of that is why Zechariah is praising God! I’m sure he wanted to praise God for the birth of his son, John, which is what second half of his prophecy is largely about. He focuses more on John’s part to play in all that God is doing in the second half. So he’s praising God for the birth of John, but *clearly* he’s praising God for God’s redeeming, remembering, and rescuing. This is praiseworthy news. And for Zechariah and all of Israel, all three of these are particularly relevant right then, because they’re under Roman rule. These are not the best of times for them, and so this is a timely word for them.

And it’s timely news that extends to you and me as well – that God redeems, remembers, and rescues us. In our fake news culture, we need to

know and be reminded that this is true news. Americans need this news. Russians need this news. Ugandans need this news. The homeless need this news. The sick need this news. Lord knows Mariners fans need this news. The jobless need this news. Husbands and wives need this news. People who are abused need this news. The wealthy need this news. The poor need this news. You and I need this news, that God redeems, remembers, and rescues us. It's why we gather on Sundays to praise God in community and why we praise God on our own at different times in the week.

This news is at the center of all that we do as a Church, all that we are as Christians. It's about what *God* is doing *in* us individually and collectively and *through* us to the world. This redeeming, remembering, and rescuing is God's gift to you and me, which we celebrate this Christmas, every Christmas, and throughout the year. It's all about God. It's not about us. Just as Zechariah finally realized after 9 months of not being able to talk, that what God was doing really wasn't about his or his wife's capabilities or shortcomings or vision for what could happen in the future...just as that was true for him: what God is doing in your life isn't about your capabilities, or your shortcomings, or your vision for how things could be. This is about what God is doing. It's his gift. It's his grace. It's his redeeming, remembering, and rescuing. And on this Sunday when we remember the peace that Jesus brings into our lives, that is truly praiseworthy news. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ Google Dictionary