



Luke 1:67-80
 Forgotten Christmas
 "Zechariah's Peace"

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 Fourth Sunday of Advent

Well we've been in a sermon series this Advent called "Forgotten Christmas" where we're looking at some of the people of the Christmas story who aren't in the nativity scenes. These are the people who are not in the spotlight, and yet they have powerful and significant roles in what God is doing. Right there is a word for us, because most of us are not in the spotlight. And yet God can work through you just as well. A couple weeks ago as we looked at "Elizabeth's Joy," I mentioned her husband, Zechariah, as well. You'll recall that he was a Jewish priest and while serving in the temple one day was visited by the angel Gabriel, or "Gabe." Gabriel's message was that he and Elizabeth would finally conceive a child. Zechariah literally couldn't believe Gabriel, expressed his doubt, and so Gabriel made him mute. Well today, we fast-forward to some 9 months later.

In the verses immediately before today's reading, the baby is born. All the townsfolk are excited for Zech and Liz, and gather around after the baby is born, asking what they're going to name him. **In that time, it was common for parents to name a baby boy after his grandfather, or perhaps after the father.** It's not so uncommon in our day, either. Obviously, if they had several boys, then other names would be used, oftentimes other ancestors. So that's what they're expecting.

And since Zechy is still mute, Elizabeth answers, "His name is John." And the people are all like, "Whatyoutalkinabout, 'Liz'beth?" (like Gary Coleman from "Different Strokes".) She doesn't have any relatives by that name, so they think she's off her rocker. Well, Zechariah asks for the first century equivalent of an iPad, and writes on it, "His name is John." And in that moment, his muteness is undone, and he begins praising God, while Elizabeth quietly grieves in the corner because the peace in her household is now over. Nah...just kidding. I'm sure she was very glad that her husband could speak again, even if it did mean hearing him yell at the television during sporting events.

But with his rediscovered voice he begins to praise God. You might think he'd want to talk everyone's ear off with nine months of pent-up things he'd been wanting to say...and maybe he did eventually get there...but his immediate reaction is to praise God. That's what's been pent up for 9 months! And this un-muting got everyone in the region wondering about who this child was going to grow up and be. It was clear that there is something special about him. That gets us to today's reading, **Luke 1:67-80**. Pray.

So, Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit, and bursts out with these words. It's called "Zechariah's Song" in a lot of our Bibles. You probably have that sub-heading. Remember, sub-headings like that are added by the publisher of your Bible as a way of helping you find your way around, and giving some context for what follows. That being said, we don't know if he literally sang this, or if it was more of a spontaneous poem. Maybe someone started beat boxing and it was a Spirit-filled, improvised rap. I don't know.

But we look at this and we might wonder, "What on earth is all of this about and why am I listening to a message on it?" Right? I mean there's some very foreign and strange stuff in here: "horn of salvation", "holy covenant", "oath to our father Abraham", "prophet of the Most High" and on it goes. What is this stuff?

Have you ever been in a new city...a large one like Paris or London or Beijing or New York...and gone on a bus tour? Here in Seattle you can go on the "Ride the Ducks" Tour which my family did a few years ago. I loved it. They endured it. I like these things. We did one in Paris 17 years ago where we put on some headphones that connect to an audio recording, and as you go around the city, the recording tells you what you're looking at, why it's important, and so forth. I think they're a great way to get a surface overview of a city, understand some of the important places in it, and understand the layout of the city at the same time.

Well, if you read this passage and wonder what's going on, it's like we've missed that bus tour of Israelite history (or forgotten what we learned), and we're just diving right into the results of all that history. It doesn't really make sense. So, let's see if we can make some sense of this.

First, recognize that the passage is sort of divided into two main sections. The first part, verses 68-75, are speaking about what God will do through Jesus. The second half, verses 76-80 are about John, Zechariah's son, and what God will do through *him*. I say "sort of" two sections because it's all God's activity; it's all one "unit." But if we look at the two sections this way, it helps us to make a little more sense of them. Also, John is the one we know mostly as John the Baptist. That's what he's known as later on because of the ministry he had of baptizing people in the Jordan River.

So, there are four key words that will help us understand this passage. The first word is: "redeemed." We see it in verse 68. "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them." To *redeem* means to compensate for the faults of something or to regain possession of something. And God does both. God compensates for our faults – our sins – through Jesus Christ. And God regains possession. He brings us back into relationship with him through Jesus. The history that we miss by not having the Biblical bus tour, is that God has done this in other ways throughout Israelite history. He's done it on a national level, and on an individual level. God is in the business of redemption.

In fact: **Even in this moment in time as Zechariah speaks this, they are in need of redemption.** They're under Roman rule. Now, it's not quite as bad as it was under Babylonian rule, because they've been allowed to return to Jerusalem. That return happened when they were under Persian rule after they conquered Babylon and we've looked at a bunch of Old Testament passages this fall that come from that era. But then the Persians are conquered and Israel came under Greek rule in the 4th Century B.C. That's when Alexander the Great conquered Persia. Then in 63 B.C. the Romans conquered Greece, and so now Israel is under Roman occupation. Probably many of us are familiar with that. None of it, in some ways, is as bad as it was with the Babylons – there's no "exile". They stay in their hometowns, and so forth. They can worship in the Temple, and live their lives fairly normally. But there is foreign occupation and they're still in an oppressed time with the Romans in charge.

So, they are in need of redemption. In fact, as probably many of you know, the general expectation of Jews was that this long-expected Messiah would redeem them from the earthly powers that ruled over them. It would be a political redemption. But, as Jesus says later on, “My Kingdom is not of this earth.” His redemption is a spiritual one, it’s an eternal one. So, this word, redemption, is a key word. We all need redeeming. And Zechariah’s message here is a reminder that God will do that through Jesus.

The next key word is: “remember” (verse 72). (I said verse 68 in the message, and I have no idea why!) Again, it references the Old Testament, Abraham in particular, and this idea of “Covenant” that is also prominent throughout the Old Testament. God makes a covenant – beginning with Abraham, and then continuing on throughout the generations. The covenant is essentially the same over time, though it gets reinforced and developed over time. Probably the best-known rendition of it, and the one that has the defining language of God’s Covenant, is the one established through Moses with Israel on Mount Sinai. We looked at that some this summer in our Exodus series. But even that one is a reframing of, and development of, the one with Abraham.

And what Zechariah is saying here is that God will remember his Covenant, and has remembered it as he has come to his people, as he says in verse 68. He’s done this in Jesus. And this is good news. God remembers you. You may have been forgotten by others. Maybe you feel forgotten by your family or your friends. There can be a lot of brokenness in our lives because of being forgotten. The Movie Home Alone doesn’t give us any clue about the emotional and psychological trauma of being forgotten when a family goes to Paris for vacation and accidentally leaves their son at home. Being forgotten stinks, and it can wreck us. God doesn’t forget: He remembers. He remembers you, and we know that because he’s come to us in Jesus.

So we’ve got redeem, we’ve got remember...and: **The third key word is “rescue” in verse 74.** We’ll touch on this one very briefly because it’s similar to redeem. But I want to highlight it because if you can’t remember redeem, then remember “rescue” and link them together in your Bibles. Like, draw an arrow from “rescue” to “redeem,” because they are very similar. To

rescue something is to bring it back from danger. And that's what God does when he redeems us, particularly when we think of redemption as "bring back into possession." God rescues us, through Jesus, and brings us into his possession. He takes us out of harm's way, takes us out of the prison of our sin and brokenness and selfishness and pride and everything else that we succumb to. He rescues us from that stuff.

The fourth key word then is "serve", in verse 75. God redeems, remembers, and rescues us, so that we might serve him. Now, it's tempting to stick with the "r" words as the key words and go with righteousness, because that word is here, too. And for sure, that's a big, important word as well. But the real key word here is this word, "serve." God's redeeming, his remembering, and his rescuing is for a purpose: so that we might serve him all of our days. If you're not serving God in some way...and when I say "some way" I don't mean it's a box you check off once or twice a week...it's a whole life approach...**If you're not serving God with your time, your talent, and your treasure, then you're missing out on the earthly result of the work he's done.** I say "earthly" result, because for sure there is an eternal result as well: that we would be in his presence for eternity. Jesus' kingdom is not of this earth, as I mentioned earlier that Jesus says. But as long as our hearts are beating and our lungs are breathing, God has done what he's done so that we might serve Him.

Verse 76 is a brief word about Zechariah's own son: that he's going to be a prophet of God to help make all this redeeming, remembering, rescuing, and serving by people possible and help usher it all in. He's going to "prepare the way for him" as he puts it here. He's the forerunner to Jesus. He's the announcer before the start of a game, letting everyone know it's about to begin, and calling all the players onto the field or the court. That's where he invites us to be. We're not in the stands. No one serves by sitting in the stands. We get out on the court, out on the field. And John prepares the way for that. That's his role.

And: The last thing I want to end with is the last thing Zechariah says: That all that God will do – this redeeming, rescuing, remembering, and then our response of serving – leads to peace (v. 79). This is where peace

is found. People look for peace in so many places in life, but true, lasting peace is found in God. When we realize that we've been redeemed, remembered and rescued by God, and then we serve him: we experience true and lasting peace. I've titled today's message, "Zechariah's Peace." But I don't mean that in the sense of him being the source of our peace. Rather, it's that he points us to real peace. He seems to have that peace himself. He at least has a piece of it, right? I mean, he can't possibly be saying this without some degree of experiencing it.

But how about you and me? **Do you have peace in the midst of challenges?** Whether that's the foreign occupation of their land, or the challenge of an illness or affliction like the muteness he had for all those months, or the lonely road of a job search you might experience, or the heartache of broken and dysfunctional relationships, the disappointment of dreams unrealized... There are so many ways that we live in darkness and in the shadow of death as he says here in verse 79...but in the very next words he says that even then we will have peace because of who God is, what he has done, and what he is even still doing.

So, I pray you would have this peace. It's a peace, that, as Paul writes later in Philippians, "passes all understanding." We can't fully comprehend it. It's beyond our understanding. That's a peace that lasts. That's a peace that is from beyond us. Any peace that we provide ourselves is really no peace at all. I can barely get myself out of bed some days because of the challenges of life or even just a bad night of sleep...how could I possibly think I can create real and lasting peace in my life – or in my death? We can't do anything about that. All our efforts at peace in death fall short.

But the eternal God of the universe can give us that kind of peace. That's why he has redeemed us, remembers us, rescues us, and invites us to serve him so others would experience these same things...and ultimately we and others would therefore experience His peace. So, don't forget this message from Zechariah, and may you have true and lasting peace through the gift of Jesus that God has given us. Let's pray...Amen.