**The Season of Advent**

**Sunday December 9, 2018**

**Advent 2: “Zechariah’s Song” (Luke 1:67-79)**

**1. Introduction: *The King’s Speech***

As I was reflecting on this passage from Luke’s Gospel, I thought about a favorite movie of mine – *The King’s Speech* (2010). This film is a historical drama that tells the story of Prince Albert or King George VI (the father of the current monarch, Queen Elizabeth II). Since his brother, Prince Edward abdicated the throne, Albert had to ascend the throne as King George VI, but he had a debilitating speech impediment that severely hindered his ability to speak publicly. Knowing that the country needed her husband to be able to communicate effectively, Albert’s wife, Elizabeth hired Lionel Logue, an Australian actor and speech therapist, to help him overcome his stammer. An extraordinary friendship developed between the two men, as Logue used unconventional means to teach the monarch how to speak with confidence.

 The movie is a moving portrayal of a person who overcomes tremendous obstacles in order to rise to the great tasks set before him. While many aspects of this film make it very effective, its use of light and darkness mirrors Prince Albert’s journey as he overcomes his speech impediment. Throughout the film the main characters are mostly inside, in darkened or low-light rooms. When they are outside, a shroud of fog envelops them. For instance, in the pivotal scene where Lionel, the speech therapist, tries to convince Prince Albert that he would be a better King than his brother, they are walking through a park, completely enveloped by fog. The film’s lack of light and use of fog contributes its oppressive feel, which mirrors Albert’s feelings of being trapped by his stuttering problem. The climax of the movie is the King’s most important speech. Albert, now King George VI, must give a speech over the radio to his subjects throughout the Commonwealth because Britain had just declared war on Nazi Germany. With the help, support and coaching of his speech therapist, King George successfully makes the speech without any stuttering. After leaving the radio room he is greeted with much applause and the balcony doors of Buckingham Palace are thrown wide open and he and his family step out into the light to greet the crowds below. His long journey in the darkness and fog is over and he stands in the light of day.

 Speech, or the lack thereof, is also the subject of this morning’s Gospel lesson. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, had been unable to speak for many months. Suddenly, at the ceremony where his baby son was being circumcised and named, his speech returns and he “began *praising* *God*” (1:64). The result, this beautiful song of praise that was read this morning, praises God for his gracious activity in the past, the present and the future. I find it interesting that when Zechariah’s long silence ends, he gives praise to God. Freed from this period of silence, he could then praise and worship God. *It is the same with us*. Verses 74 and 75 of Zechariah’s song declare, “We have been rescued from our enemies, so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness forever” (1:74-75). We, too, need to be released from whatever hinders or imprisons us, so that we can worship God without fear.

**2. Zechariah’s Journey: *From Silence to Praise***

 Zechariah, whose name means *Yahweh remembers,* is the first character in Luke’s grand narrative. He was a Jewish priest from the line of priests associated with Abijah (1:5; 1 Chronicles 24:7-19). He and his wife Elizabeth are described as being righteous in the God’s eyes, childless, and advanced in years (1:6-7). Their story sounds a lot like Abraham and Sarah’s or Elkanah and Hanna’s. So, we’re not at all surprised when the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that a baby is on the way. This all happened when Zechariah was serving God in Jerusalem Temple, performing his priestly duties (1:8-10). While he was burning incense in the inner sanctuary, Gabriel appeared to him and announced that his long desire for a son would be fulfilled and the son’s name would be John (1:13). Zechariah’s response was one of *disbelief*, “How can I know that this will happen? I’m an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years” (1:18). Because of his disbelief, Zechariah was rendered unable to speak until after John’s birth (1:19). Soon afterward, Elizabeth became pregnant and was ecstatic (1:24).

 Luke’s narrative then shifts to the more significant matters related to the birth of Jesus (1:26-56). After the Annunciation (1:26-38), Mary’s encounter with Elizabeth (1:39-45), and the Magnificat (1:46-56) the story shifts back to John’s birth (1:57-58). Eight days after his birth, family and friends gathered for the circumcision and naming of the baby boy. When it came time to name the child, everyone insisted that he be named after his father, which was the standard practice of the day (1:59). Elizabeth was adamant that the child be named *John*, a choice that received some criticism (1:60). Turning to Zechariah, they asked for his opinion, since he was the father. Unable to speak, he wrote on a tablet, “His name is John” (1:63). Instantly, he could speak again, and his first words were words of praise to God.

 You see, Zechariah just couldn’t believe Gabriel’s announcement; it seemed so impossible. So, he was completely silent during Elizabeth’s pregnancy, unable to express his joy verbally. But when the promise was fulfilled right in front of his eyes, he believed the angel’s words and he responded accordingly. “His name is John,” he declared. This baby is the fulfilment of God’s promises. It was at that moment that the silence of his unbelief turned to the joy of faith. So, Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, uttered this prophecy. Throughout Luke’s birth narrative, various people are filled the Spirit and as a result they speak amazing words. Elizabeth was filled with the Spirit upon Mary’s arrival and she exclaimed, “You are blessed by God above all other women” (1:41-42). When Jesus was presented in the Temple, a man named Simeon was filled with the Spirit and, taking baby Jesus in his arms, he proclaimed, “Lord, now I can die in peace! As you have promised me, I have seen the Savior you have given to all people” (1:25, 28-32). Zechariah too was filled with the Holy Spirit as he spoke these words. At that moment Zechariah realized that the events around him were not just random occurrences, but a grand fulfilment of God’s promises. So, he gives praise to God for his mercy, his faithfulness, his redemption and his wonderful light.

**3. Zechariah’s Song: *Blessed be the Lord God of Israel***

Luke notes that Zechariah uttered a *prophecy* (1:67). This description acknowledges that he was speaking by the power and direction of God. It also implies that his words had a predictive function in foretelling events that were yet to come. This is certainly the case here since Zechariah predicts the future activities of John and Jesus (1:76-79). But at its very heart, Zechariah’s utterance is a *psalm* or *a song of praise to God*. If Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth were every made into a movie, it would be a musical because everyone is singing. Mary sings a song of praise, *the Magnificat* (1:46-55). The heavenly choir of angels sings a song of praise, *Gloria* (2:14). Simeon sings a song of praise, the *Nunc Dimittis* (2:29-32). Zechariah too sings a song of praise, the *Benedictus* (1:68-79).

Of course, the invitation is for all of us to join in these songs of praise to God. Zechariah’s song begins with a call to praise - *Blessed be* or *Praise be the Lord God of Israel* (1:68). His words reflect the Jewish blessing prayer known as the *berakhah.* This isa spoken blessing or thanksgiving to God that acknowledges him as the source of all blessing. After this initial call to praise, Zechariah’s song gives the reasons why the Lord, the God of Israel, is to be praised - “Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, *because he has visited and redeemed his people*” (1:68). Zechariah’s words emphasize that our God is not some aloof *higher power,* somewhere out there, unconnected and disinterested with humanity. No, the story of Israel establishes that God cares for people and has intervened time and time again to rescue them. The foundational story of Israel – the Exodus from Egypt – shows that God is compassionate because he heard the cries of his people and he took action by rescuing them from their enslavement in Egypt.

In Christ, we see God’s ultimate visitation to humanity. John 1:14 proclaims, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” In Christ, God fully entered into the messiness of our world so that he could *redeem* us, that is, set us free from enslavement. In Luke’s birth narrative, the words *salvation* and *Savior* frequently occur, stressing that with the coming of Christ, God’s definitive deliverance has come. At that first Advent, God raised up a *mighty Savior* or *a horn of salvation* for us (1:69). His coming was in fulfilment of God’s promises that a Messiah would come from the line of King David to free the people from oppression, to deliver them from the hands of their enemies (1:70-71). Yet God’s Messiah did not come with an army to lead a violent revolt against the Romans; instead, his arrival would bring peace with God and salvation from sin. The oppressive reality of sin in our lives can weigh us down and keep us distant from God. Jesus came to rescue us from all that by offering us *forgiveness* (1:77). One writer has commented, “We begin now, in Advent, whether we realize it or not, to prepare for Easter – because Easter is the reason Christmas is important” (Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year,* p. 69). The path to the cross begins at the manger because Christ the Savior is born.

The coming of Christ is the climax of the covenant; the fulfilment of the promises that God had made to Abraham (1:72-73). God is merciful and faithful; he has done what he promised. Because of Christ, we have become members of God’s family and recipients of those promised covenant blessings. We are freed to worship, serve and praise God for all that he has done for us (1:74-75).

**3. Our Songs of Praise**

As I reflected on Zechariah’s song of praise, I realized that it’s easy to keep all these concepts in a nice, neat theological box. Words like *redemption, salvation, deliverance, forgiveness* and *covenant* seem so abstract in light of the realities of our everyday lives. Even the incredible and wonderful truth of Christmas – that God visited and redeemed us in Christ – can become a routine thing in our lives. We’ve heard the stories all before and we know them by heart. Yet for Zechariah, these stories of God’s merciful intervention were not some tales from long ago; they were deeply personal.

 As Zechariah held his baby boy in his arms, he realized God’s story and his story had intersected. His son, John, would have an important role to play in God’s unfolding plan. He would be God’s prophet, preparing the way for God’s Messiah and teaching people of their need for forgiveness (1:76-77). But he also realized that his son, as precious as he was, would only have a supporting role for the real star of the God’s show. And so, Zechariah’s song of praise comes to an end, “*Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace*” (1:78-79).

 The long night of darkness has come to an end. Jesus, the morning light has dawned and he dispels the darkness in our lives and shows us a different path, the path of peace. So what is the darkness that surrounds us like a fog? What oppressive weight do you and I carry in our lives right now that Jesus can take from us? What are the darkened corners of our lives that Jesus’ light needs to shine into? This Christmas, I pray that the tender mercies of God would touch your lives so that the light of Christ would dispel the darkness, wherever and whatever it is. This Christmas, I pray that we’d be all like Zechariah, whose mouth was opened so that he could praise God. Being freed from everything that enslaves us, let us serve, worship and praise God without fear in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live (1:74-75). Listen to these words from Madeleine L’Engle.

 **First Coming**

*He did not wait till the world was ready,*
*till men and nations were at peace*
*He came when the Heavens were unsteady*
*and prisoners cried out for release.*

*He did not wait for the perfect time.*
*He came when the need was deep and great.*
*He dined with sinners in all their grime,*
*turned water into wine. He did not wait*

*till hearts were pure. In joy he came*
*to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.*
*To a world like ours, of anguished shame*
*He came, and his Light would not go out.*

*He came to a world which did not mesh,*
*to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.*
*In the mystery of the Word made Flesh*
*the Maker of the stars was born.*

*We cannot wait till the world is sane*
*to raise our songs with joyful voice,*
*for to share our grief, to touch our pain,*
*He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!*