

Free to Worship Fearlessly
A Sermon on Luke 1:67-79
Second Sunday of Advent
December 9, 2016

Introduction

It is traditional to have readings about John the Baptist on the second and third Sundays of Advent. John is the messenger who prepares the way of the Lord. The gospel reading is about John's baptizing in the wilderness. This is an alternate reading: it takes place when John is circumcised, eight days after he is born. Our text is a hymn sung by his father, Zechariah. It is a hymn of praise to God.

We tend to focus on the birth of Jesus during Advent. By focusing on Jesus, we sometimes forget that Jesus is pointing to God. Jesus is important because he tells us what God is like.

During Advent we lift up four themes: Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. They are four sides of what God is like. Today we will talk about how God embodies peace.

First Move: A Hymn of Praise to God

Luke's Christmas story starts with John the Baptist. John's father, Zechariah, is a priest. He and his wife Elizabeth are devout and just; but they are old and have no children. Zechariah is on duty at the Temple in Jerusalem. When he is in the sanctuary, the angel Gabriel appears to him and tells him that he and Elizabeth will have a baby. Gabriel tells Zechariah to name the baby John. He will be a prophet for the Lord. He will turn many people of Israel to God. He will prepare the way of the Lord.

Zechariah says, "How can this be? My wife and I are old." Gabriel says, "Because you did not believe my words, you will be deaf and dumb until these things happen."

The miracle happens. Elizabeth, an old woman, conceives and gives birth to a baby boy. Zechariah has been unable to speak or hear since Gabriel appeared to him nine months earlier. Eight days after the baby is born, his parents take him to the Temple. It was customary to have a ceremony to circumcise a baby boy on the eighth day. The child would be named at this ceremony.

Friends and family have come for the ceremony. They expect that Zechariah and Elizabeth will give the baby a family name. Elizabeth says, "No, he is to be called

John.” This is a miracle in and of itself. Gabriel appeared to Zechariah not Elizabeth. Elizabeth doesn’t know that Gabriel had told Zechariah to name the baby John. God is working through Elizabeth, too.

The crowd motioned to Zechariah. He couldn’t hear what Elizabeth said. They asked Zechariah what to name the child. Zechariah writes on a tablet, “His name is John.” The crowd is amazed. Immediately Zechariah’s mouth is opened and his tongue is freed.

Zechariah bursts into song. The first part of the song is a hymn of praise to God. It sounds like one of the psalms.

It is called the Benedictus because that is the first word of Zechariah’s hymn in the Latin Vulgate, the Bible that the Roman Catholic church used for 15 centuries. Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel: Blessed be the Lord God of Israel. Benedictus means blessing. A benediction is bringing God’s blessing on us as we depart.

The first part of the hymn talks about what God is doing. Zechariah is looking beyond the birth of John the Baptist and the birth of Jesus. The births of John and Jesus are a sign that God notices the people, just as God noticed the Hebrew slaves when they were crying out in Egypt.

God will bring salvation to the people. Over the centuries we have changed the meaning of salvation. Many Christians think of salvation as a ticket to heaven. Salvation means that my eternal soul will be saved.

That’s not what salvation means in the Bible. The Greek word for salvation is σωτηρία. It means deliverance or rescue. We see psalm after psalm that prays to God for deliverance from our enemies. The people of Israel in the psalms pray to God to deliver them from the nations that have conquered them and oppressed them. They are not praying for deliverance from their personal enemies. They are praying for deliverance from the enemies of the people as a whole.

In Jesus’ day, that meant deliverance from the Romans. Zechariah is praising God because God will raise up a servant from the House of David to deliver the people of Israel from their enemies, from the hand of all those who hate us.

God will deliver the people from their enemies by keeping the promises that God made to Abraham and David. The promise that God made to Abraham was to deliver us from our enemies so that we may worship God fearlessly. It is worshiping God as a way of life. It is recognizing that God calls us to do things differently from the way that the world teaches us. Worshiping God fearlessly means living in holiness and righteousness all our days.

God promised David in 2 Samuel 7 that his offspring would rule God’s kingdom forever. God had always treated Israel as his son. Now he will treat David’s

heirs as his son to rule over the people. “I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.” God is honoring this promise through Jesus, who will be the son of God.

In the second half of the song, Zechariah turns from praising God to blessing his child. “You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High. You will go before the Lord to prepare his ways. You will give knowledge of deliverance to his people by cancellation of their sins.”

The sins are not individual failings. I forgot to say my prayers last night. I was rude to my wife. I am addicted to drugs.

The sins are like the sins that we heard in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 59. Sins are acts of injustice, things like lying, suing people unjustly, committing acts of violence. “Their feet run to evil, and they rush to shed innocent blood. The ways of peace they do not know and there is no justice in their paths.”

The people believed that Rome had conquered them because of their sins. Their society was unjust. They lived by violence and injustice instead of walking in the paths of peace.

Zechariah blesses John for being the prophet who will prepare the way for Christ. Zechariah praises Christ as the who will give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. He will guide our feet in the path of peace.

Luke wrote his gospel at least 50 years, maybe as much as 90 years after Jesus was crucified. It was at least 10 years after Rome destroyed the Temple and drove all the Jews out of Jerusalem. Luke’s audience would have mixed feelings when they heard Zechariah’s song. They would know that Jesus had not delivered them from their enemies. Luke is writing his gospel with regret. The people did not turn from violence and walk in the path of peace. They had engaged the Romans in a bloody war for four years and had been slaughtered.

Luke is singing a lament for his people through Zechariah. God sent his son but the people still did not turn from their ways of violence and walk in peace. Luke is saying, it’s not too late. God will still deliver us from our enemies if only we change our ways and follow the light of Christ.

Second Move: Serving Christ Unashamedly

I would like to focus for the rest of our time together on verses 74 and 75. We are delivered from the hands of our enemies so that we can worship God fearlessly in holiness and righteousness all our days.

The Greek word λατρεύω means worship and service. Worship of the gods was modeled on the service or worship of a king. People brought food and tribute and petitions to a king. In the same way, the people of Israel brought sacrifices and

prayers to God in the Temple. The Hebrew prophets pointed out that the worship of God was more than that. Worship is not just a ritual or a ceremony. To truly honor God, it was necessary to obey his laws. We worship God in ritual holiness and in righteous conduct.

This is the same vision that we see in Revelation 7:11, where all the angels are standing around the throne, worshiping God. St. Augustine's vision of the afterlife was a time for all souls to be engaged in continual worship and praise of God.

We talk about eschatology. Today's text says that the end we are aiming for is to let our other concerns go so we are free to worship God. Think of the Grinch Stole Christmas. At the end of the show, all the Whos in Whoville all join together in a circle and sing praises to God.

In Luke's day, to worship fearlessly meant to worship without fear of persecution. Christians were persecuted by Romans for refusing to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods. Jews also persecuted Christians for fear that Christians would bring the Romans down on the synagogues.

Worshiping fearlessly is what the Beatitudes calls pure of heart: single-mindedly devoted to God. Your heart is the seat of your will and your desire. Your intentions are not divided. You are not multi-tasking. You are focusing on God and God's will. You are responsive to what God is calling you to do. That is the primary motivation for your actions.

Worshiping fearlessly today means we serve Christ unashamedly. Ruth Fletcher, our facilitator in New Beginnings this weekend, told us that we will be engaging nones and dones in our community. That is the fastest growing demographic today. The nones and dones have given up on church. Robert Jones in *The End of White Christian America* says that young people are tired of the politics in church. They see churches on the right and left as using a thin layer of religion to justify their political convictions. Evangelicals are fouling their own nest by their unwavering support for Trump, who doesn't seem to reflect any of the values of Christ. It will hasten the exodus of young people from the church and harden the opposition of those who are already outside the church.

It is not just young people. The Coalition Against the Death Penalty is a coalition of churches and non-profit organizations. There are a lot of former Christians and non-Christians on the board. They prefer that the Coalition use humanist language when it is expressing its message to the public. One of our most committed members told me that she didn't like having our board meetings at the Regional Church because there was a cross on the wall.

We cannot be afraid to be Christians. We don't wear it on our sleeve. We aren't self-righteous about it. We don't have to force Christianity down people's throats. But we do let people know that we are acting theologically not as a partisan activist. We can share our perspective. This is who I am and this is why I am doing what I am doing. I oppose the death penalty because I believe that each and every person is a child of God, even those on death row. All life is sacred. It is a tragedy to snuff out anyone's life. God doesn't give up on murderers: Cain committed the first murder and he went on to found the first city. King David, Moses, the Apostle Paul, all committed murders and God didn't give up on them. When Jesus says no more eye for an eye, I believe him. Killing a person on death row is not justice, it satisfies our lust for retribution.

I told the folks at Leadership Training yesterday that I went to the annual dinner of the Oklahoma Conference of Churches last year and I wondered on the way into the dinner whether I would hear any of the speakers mention Christ. The OCC has become focused on interfaith work instead of ecumenical work. I would like to see them work more on bringing churches together. What can we do together in Christ?

Progressive Christians too often take the position that they don't want to offend people by bringing up Christ. I can understand that when we are at our place of business, but when we are engaged in mission, we should tell people what motivates us. We are not trying to convert them, we are being honest. That is a contemporary form of evangelism. We proclaim the good news less by words than by action. We show people what a difference Christ makes in our lives and we tell them what it is about our faith that leads us to act.

That is worship. We are praising God by reflecting Christ in our own lives. That is the kind of worship that is most pleasing to God.

Conclusion

Jesus guides our feet in the way of peace. God is always working to bring peace and wholeness to us. When we worship God fearlessly, we stop and listen for how God is calling us to be agents of reconciliation in the world.

We will be talking in house meetings in the coming weeks about what is our mission to this community. How do we reach the nones and dones? Our starting point is as Disciples of Christ: we are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.