

“Benedictus”

Luke 1:67-79

67 And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, 68 “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people 69 and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, 70 as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, 71 that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; 72 to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, 73 the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us 74 that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. 76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, 77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, 78 because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (ESV)

If you're not familiar with what Advent means “coming.” It either means the coming of Jesus (in this context) the first time or it means His anticipated coming the second time. Of course this time of year you almost inevitably, if you're a preacher, end up looking at one of two places in the Bible: the Gospel of Matthew or the Gospel of Luke because those are where the “Christmas” accounts are found (if that's what you want to call them). It's interesting when you think about all the Gospels together, they all give us a different angle on Who Jesus is. Matthew is like a rabbi as I read it. Everything that he says he qualifies by saying, “It is fulfilled.” He's trying to show Jewish people how the coming of Jesus fulfills what God promised in the Old Testament. So over and over again you hear him saying, “It is fulfilled . . . Thus, it is fulfilled.” Then you have one of my favorite Gospels (Mark, because he, like I, had ADHD). When you read the Gospel of Mark he doesn't give you any kind of prologue. He just jumps right end and says, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ—John came and John preached repentance.” Sixteen times in his Gospel Mark says “immediately.” “Immediately we did this and then Jesus did this, and then immediately we turned and did something else.” He bounces from one thing to another. Then, of course, you have John. He's much more philosophical. You can imagine him sitting there with the birds [making a bird-chirping sound and motioning that they're flying around his head]. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” And he's licking his pen.

Luke is among the most interesting of all four because while the first three make sense, Luke's does and doesn't. Luke is sort of the Bob Costas of the New Testament. Did you ever watch the Olympics? I'm one of these kind of people: I don't watch the Olympics very much any more because since the time I was a boy because now it's almost all human-interest stories. You get to see one guy swim and then you spend an hour listening to human-interest stories, and you sort of get tired of Costas yammering all the time. “Just show me some swimming, Dude. Show me some skiing. Show me something.” That's not always the best way to approach things, I'll grant you. And you learn that from Luke. It's not always bad being Bob Costas. What do I mean when I say, “Luke is the Bob Costas of the New Testament?” Luke more than anyone else gives us human-interest stories. Where Mark just says, “John the Baptist came preaching repentance,” Luke starts with a human interest story about John's parents. If you asked me, “Tommy, do you want to know about John's parents before you learn about John?” I'd say, “No, John's important. Forget about the parents. Just tell me the important stuff.” What you see when you get Luke's human interest story is rich understanding of who John was, and ultimately who Jesus was.

So this morning we're going to look at the first human-interest story in the Gospel of Luke. That's the story of Zachariah and Elizabeth and ultimately their son, John. Elizabeth was a cousin of Mary. You see this pattern in the Bible that Zachariah and Elizabeth were old. I don't know what that means by their standard, but by their own description they were old and Elizabeth was barren. They hadn't had children and for all they knew they couldn't have children. Zachariah was a priest. His unit draws the lot to be the ones who light the incense in the temple.

When he goes to light incense in the temple, he is visited by an angel named Gabriel, who says, “You and Elizabeth are going to have a son.” Surprise, surprise. And here’s the interplay that goes between them in chapter one.

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” ²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them . . . (ESV)

He was struck mute because of his unbelief. Now, his unbelief didn’t change the promise. They would still have a son and he was still to name him John. The next thing you see is the angel going to Mary. Mary’s response is quite different, and she actually prays for her response. And then we go back to Zachariah and John is born. In a sense it’s a very funny scene.

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” ⁶¹ And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” ⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called.

Now think about that for a second. Zachariah is mute but he is not deaf. You can just imagine the scene with them arguing with Elizabeth and then turning to Zachariah as if he can’t hear anything and going [in a loud voice], “What do you want us to name him?” And him motioning, “Just give me some paper.” He gets a writing tablet and he writes on there, “His name will be John.” As soon as he writes that his tongue is loosed and he begins to praise God and people react to that. Let me read that to you, and that will get us right into our text.

⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. ⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, ⁶⁶ and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him. (ESV)

You know, at this time of year I can’t read these stories without thinking of other stories. Can you think of another story where a couple had a child and everyone who saw the child said, “What is this kid? What is he going to be? What do you expect of him? Who is he?” And they were either afraid of him or they mocked him. Work with me. His name is Rudolph. “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer had a very shiny nose. And if you ever saw it, you would even say it glows. All the other reindeer used to laugh and call him names. They wouldn’t let poor Rudolph play in any reindeer games. Then one foggy Christmas Eve, Santa came to say, ‘Rudolph with your nose so bright, won’t you guide my sleigh tonight?’” Remember that story? My family does. I made them watch it again last night. I always think of Rudolph when I think of John because if you look into the sky on a dark and cloudy night and you see the nose coming, what do you know is not far behind? Santa. In other words, if you long to see Santa, the best thing you could see is Rudolph’s nose because you know if the nose is coming then Santa is not far behind. And if you long for Messiah, if you long for deliverance from your sins, the best thing you could see would be John because you know that if John’s here, Messiah is not far behind. You are now ready to receive him and embrace him, unless you happen to have been naughty. Right? If you’re a naughty boy or girl, then when you see Rudolph’s nose, you fear. You say, “Oh. I haven’t been good this year. Now that I see the nose, that means that Santa can’t be far behind and I’m going to get sticks and coal and be embarrassed the

rest of my life.” Another reason that people feared, and I think this is the bigger reason, especially in the case of John. Although they knew when John came that Messiah would not be long after, you would think, “What’s not to be excited about? What would you be afraid about?” People back then were afraid of the same thing that most people in this room are afraid of. That, of course, is instability and change. Think about it. All the way back to the Old Testament when Israel was enslaved in Egypt, they cried out to God, and God said, “I heard them.” He sent Moses to deliver them out of their bondage and into the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. What is the first thing they began to do? Complain. They asked to go back to Egypt. “Take us back there. At least there we had food to eat.” In other words, in the existential moment of having to make a decision, “Do I want to be free or do I want to be in bondage but at least it’s my bondage and it’s predictable?” People almost always pick bondage, or at least we struggle with bondage. It was the same thing in their day. They were under Roman oppression but it really wasn’t that bad. The Romans let them do mostly what they wanted to do. The question is, “If Messiah comes, is that a good thing or is it a bad thing? Well, it’s a good thing, I guess, because we have deliverance from sins, but it’s a bad thing because of how unstable things are going to be. The Romans are not going to like us. No one’s going to like us. We might have to move. We might actually have to do something. We might have to invite people to the temple. Who knows what we’re going to have to do if Messiah really is here?” So they were afraid. On the other hand Zachariah wasn’t afraid. Apparently he did long to see Messiah, and so when he saw the birth of his own son he couldn’t help but sing. That’s what we’re going to talk about today. He sang about God’s covenant with David, about God’s covenant with Abraham, and about God’s covenant of grace. Let’s look first at God’s covenant with David. He says in verse 68,

⁶⁸ *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people ⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us (ESV)*

Did you notice that Zachariah is speaking in the past tense? He says, “He has visited us with salvation, he has visited us with redemption.” There are a couple of things going on there. For one, God only visits one of two ways, at least in the Old Testament. He visits you with salvation or he visits you with damnation, but either way he visits. It’s memorable, I guess. The other thing is what Zachariah is using here is what some people call a “prophetic perfect.” He’s talking about something in the future but it is so certain that he speaks about it in the past. Like when you talk about the Mariner’s opening day next year and someone says, “Oh, the Mariner’s opening day is going to be on such and such a day.” And you say, “I’m already there.” You’re not really already there. You’re using the prophetic perfect to say, “It’s so certain that I’m going to be there it might as well be past tense.” That’s what he’s saying, and he’s basing what he’s saying on God’s covenant with David in II Samuel chapter 7? David looks and says, “How can it be that I live in a house of cedar and God lives in a tent? I’m going to make a temple for God.” And God sent Nathan to say, “No you’re not. One of your descendents will make a temple. And just so you can be sure it will be one of your descendents, one of your descendents will be on the throne forever.” God makes a covenant with him. He promises him that one of his descendents will be on the throne forever. Zachariah mentions this. In fact he says, “It’s fulfilled. The descendent that God promised through David is here now.” But bigger than that, he says, “He has raised up from the house of David a horn of salvation.” Literarily speaking it’s a term called a synecdoche, which means part for a whole. Like you’d say, “I have a thousand head of cattle.” Not, “a thousand heads of cattle.” It’s one thing that represents everything else. So, the “horn of salvation” is just an allusion to an ox, a big ox. An ox is strength, an ox is power, an ox is ability to harm by goring you with the horn. So he says, “He’s raised up a horn of salvation through the house of David.” What’s interesting about this is that in the Old Testament, God is the only one who is ever referred to as “the horn of salvation.” As Israel’s horn of salvation he delivers them from Egypt. He delivers them from exile and he promises to deliver them from sin, and yet Zachariah says, “Now the Lord has raised up a horn of salvation for us from the house of David.” So, on one hand one promise is the horn of salvation, deliverance from enemies and the other is the king from the house of David. What Zachariah is saying is, “Now these two things have come

together in one person: the one who would deliver us from our sins and the one who will sit on the throne forever.” His name is (can you guess it?) . . . It’s not Rudolph. It’s Jesus. Jesus will be the one who will come and rescue from us our enemies. The question is, “What’s the worst enemy that you and I have?” It’s our sin. The thing that is constantly destroying you, the thing that’s constantly causing you to fail, the thing that’s constantly nagging at you is your sin and my sin. What the Gospel says is that Jesus, this baby, came in order to conquer our sin. He conquers it as king but He conquers it as God’s horn of salvation. God himself in the person of Jesus does that. How does he do it? Sin is like a parasite and you can only kill the parasite by killing the host as well. Jesus becomes a host for our sin. The question is, “Will you give it to Him?” Jesus becomes a host for our sin when He was killed on the cross. When Jesus died our sin died with Him. When Jesus rose from the dead we rise with Him. The question is, “Will you give Him your sin?”

If you’ve been in church for a while or if you’ve listened to religious radio you’ve often heard, “Will you give Jesus your life? Will you give your heart to Jesus?” I want you to give your life to Jesus. I want you to give your heart to Jesus, but the starting point for giving Jesus your life and your heart is to give Him your sin. It can’t help you. It can’t do anything but harm you. The question is, “Will you give it to him to forgive? Will you give it to him to mortify it and kill it, or will you hold onto it just in case you’ve got some other plan to take care of it?” It just doesn’t work that way.

Zachariah implies here a good question, or at least the logic of his thought. God sends His Son Jesus to die on behalf of our sins in fulfillment with His covenant with David. But the question you have to ask is, “Why would God make a covenant with David to ultimately kill His own Son (even though He would be raised from the dead and be on the throne)?” The answer to that question is the next part of the text. God makes covenant with David, apparently, because He also made a covenant with Abraham. What was God’s covenant with Abraham? Let me read this. He promised that we’ll be saved from our enemies

⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (ESV)

So what is he talking about there? If you remember the story of Abraham (you can read Genesis 12-25), in chapter 12 God comes to this person, Abraham. He’s just a heathen in their world. He says, “Follow me. Come, I will show you where you should go.” He said, “I will bless you. I will bless those who bless you. I will curse those who curse you, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” In Genesis 15 God makes a covenant with him. In Genesis 17 God gives Abraham circumcision. In Genesis 22, after God has told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac and he has been obedient, God rescues Isaac but nonetheless listen to what He says in chapter 22 of Genesis.

¹⁶ . . . “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” (ESV)

If you read the Book of Romans or Genesis 15, the obedience that Abraham showed was that of faith. But what I wanted you to catch at the beginning of that in chapter 22 was that God says, “I have sworn by Myself.” In the Old Testament when they made covenant you would swear by something, and you would invoke something or someone to come in and basically fulfill the blessings and the cursings of a covenant. A covenant says if you obey you will be blessed and if you disobey you will be cursed. God doesn’t say to Abraham, “Abraham I want you to swear by Me that you’re going to do the right thing all the time. And if you swear by me and you don’t do

the right thing I will be right there with my smiter to smite you.” What does God say? He says, “Abraham, I swear by Myself that these things will happen.” God is saying, “Abraham, I promise you that I am going to do all the work. If the covenant is kept you will get the blessings and if the covenant is violated I, God will take upon myself the curse and give you the blessing nonetheless.” God swears by Himself that he will fulfill the covenant made with Abraham. When you look at the cross of Jesus, that’s exactly what you see, that Abraham and all who followed him and all who followed Adam deserve God’s curse because we had sinned and we had broken His law. God had sworn by Himself, and what He says is, “I take the curse onto Myself.” The question is, “Do you believe that?” If Jesus has taken the curse that you and I deserve onto Himself, what does that mean for your life? Is that not an opportunity for you to be joyous and celebrate? You bear the curse no longer. That’s what Zachariah says. Notice what he says. Why? He says,

⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (ESV)

Most people don’t do that much for the sake of the Gospel. Most people don’t exhibit or experience much joy in their lives, much joy in worship. Why? It’s because we’re afraid oftentimes. We’re either afraid what God said He really didn’t mean or we’re afraid of what other people think about us. But if the Gospel is true, does it really matter what other people think about you? Since the Gospel is true does anything but God’s approval of you matter? If God approves of you and God has promised He’ll never fail you or forsake you, what does that mean? For example, I’m not a big hand raiser in church. And I know I’m speaking to a bunch of people who are not hand raisers either. But the question is, “Why wouldn’t you raise your hands in worship?” I’m not even making the case that you should. I’ll tell you why I don’t raise my hands in worship. I’m afraid what some people will think about me sometimes. That’s not right. Now, I might have other reasons that might be valid, but if I’m driven by fear of what other people think about me, what that says is I don’t get the Gospel. How about you? If you go from, “God made a covenant with David. Why did he do that? Because he makes this covenant with Abraham?” Well, you ask yourself the next question, “Well, why did He make a covenant with Abraham?” The reason he made the covenant with Abraham was because of the covenant of grace. Let’s look at that quickly. He says,

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (ESV)

Why does God make a covenant with Abraham to begin with? The answer goes back to the covenant of grace. What is the covenant of grace? It’s that in the Garden of Eden God told Adam and Eve, “If you obey you’ll be blessed and if you disobey you’ll be cursed.” They disobeyed. Immediately God steps in and says, “I will fix this. I will bear this curse. Eve, one of your kids, is going to defeat the seed of the serpent.” God shows them almost immediately: grace. That’s what Zachariah says. Why the covenant with David? Why the covenant with Abraham? Why the covenant of grace? The answer is right there in verse 78. It says,

⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God . . . (ESV)

Have you ever asked yourself the question, “Why would God not just show justice? God said that Adam and Eve would die in the day they ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He said, “The day you eat of it you’ll die.” There is some theological background that says, “Well, they were separated from God and Shalom was violated.” I preach that all the time. But there is a real sense in which you have to ask your question, “Why didn’t they just die? Why didn’t God just smite them? Why didn’t He just crush them?” The answer is right

there, “because of the tender mercy of our God.” Now the question is, “Why would God show tender mercy?” When you keep working yourself back you up in the only place you can possibly end up.

I was thinking this morning between services of when Judy and I were in college. We met after our sophomore year, I think. Judy majored in chemistry, so she was constantly having to study for things like organic chemistry and calculus and things. I majored in English. So we’d go to the library together and she would sit in the same chair hour after hour after hour. I would go and get a Coke, play ping-pong, look around at the books. And in one of the trips we made to the library I found a book by J. Gresham Machen who is one of the heroes of the faith. The book was so old and no one had read it, that Florida State used to be called The Florida State College for Women, and as people checked books out they would put a new stamp that said Florida State. I pulled this book off the shelf and the last person who read it, read it when Florida State was Florida State College for Women. The title of the book was called, “What is Faith?” The whole prologue to the book, Machen begins by asking this question that Paul asked, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” And he asks this question, “Why is God for us?” When you look through the Bible, is God for us because of how attractive we are? For most of us, no. Is He for us because of how brilliant we are? For most of us, no. Is He for us because of how righteous we are? Absolutely not. Is He for us because we’re Presbyterian? No. Is He for us because we’re Baptist? No. Is He for us because we’re Catholic? Is He for us because of anything? Machen comes to the end of his rope and basically says, “I determined that the reason that God is for us is simply because He has chosen to be.” There is no reason that you and I have, or anything that we bring to the table that would compel God to be for us. So what is it that makes Him be for us? His tender mercy. His perfect justice would see nothing but us destroyed. Yet His perfect mercy would see us saved. How do you reconcile perfect justice and perfect mercy? Well, you have to do something crazy like become a baby and live the life that those people should have lived and then you die the death they should have died on the cross. That’s the Gospel.

It’s interesting, going back to Rudolph. When we watched it last time, we’re constantly pausing it to talk about it. Where’s the first place Santa goes? There’s fog and he realizes that because he has this forerunner with him in Rudolph they can take off and deliver presents throughout the world. Do you remember the very first place that Santa stops? The first place that he stops is the Island of Misfit Toys. That makes total sense because that’s exactly what God does in the person of Jesus with his Gospel. The very first people that Jesus pursues are the misfit toys, not those who think they’re good. Remember Jesus said over and over again, “I came not for the righteous but for the unrighteous. I came not for those who are healthy, but for the sick. I didn’t come to take care of all the rest of the toys, I came to go to the Island of Misfit Toys.” It’s just a great scene. The toys were literally sitting in the dark with Charlie-in-the-Box. I own a Charlie-in-the-Box, if you’ve ever been to my house. He speaks when you walk to the front door. “Who, may I ask, are you?” Remember that? But Charlie and the spotted elephant are sitting around the paper flame in the dark and bemoaning the fact that Santa has forgotten them. Then out of nowhere Charlie says, “Hey. I think I see a light. I think that’s Rudolph.” And there’s overwhelming joy and he hasn’t even gotten there yet. That’s what you see here in this text. Is John the Baptist important? He is. But if John brings joy at his coming, think how much more Messiah brings when He arrives. That’s what we celebrate this season. Think about that.