

ADVENT 2019

Part 4: "The Benedictus"

Luke 1:57-80

By David A. Ritchie

Sunday, December 22, 2019 (The Fourth Sunday of Advent)

Scripture Reading

"Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, 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. And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel" (Luke 1:57–80, ESV).

Introduction

Today is the fourth and final Sunday of Advent season. Advent is a season of the church's year that focuses on hope and anticipation. It is a looking forward to the kingdom of God. It is a looking forward to the Day of the Lord.

Now, that concept of the Day of the Lord is a very big and very important idea in the Bible. It is be a terrifying notion equated with the idea of judgment day. And it is. The

day of the Lord is the day when God will judge the wicked and bring a total and complete end to evil. But likewise, the Day of the Lord is also a day of great hope. It is the day when God promises to bring restoration to his people.

And that is what today's passage of Scripture is all about – restoration. Zechariah is restored. And as his son is born into the world, he foresees that at long last, God is restoring his people.

So, he sings a song of blessing – a song that has been remembered in the history of the church as "*The Benedictus*." As we examine this passage today, I want to examine the Advent theme of vindication.

Exposition

1.) The Restoration of Zechariah

God is faithful to his word. As the angel Gabriel spoke to Zechariah in the Temple, so it has come to pass (cf. Lk. 1:13-16). A child is born. In obedience to the Old Testament law, Zechariah and Elizabeth circumcise their son on the eighth day.¹ Typically, a male child wasn't named until the day of his circumcision, which was a communal celebration that this child.

Elizabeth tells her relatives that her son's name will be John. This causes a small controversy. No one in the family is named John. And in this day in age, you didn't name your children based on what sounded cool or unique. You named your child after family members as a way of preserving family heritage and history.

The extended family make signs to Zechariah and thus ask for his input. Obviously, they think that he is both deaf and mute, so they think he will need some sort of sign language to understand the situation.² Sure, they think the father will want to choose a family name. He asks for something to write on, and he writes with unmistakable clarity: "His name is John" (Lk. 1:63).

This astonishes everyone. But it is not nearly as astonishing as what happens next. Suddenly, Zechariah's tongue is loosed. His voice comes back, and he launches into a song of praise and blessing unto God.

This is a dramatic reversal. Nine months earlier, Zechariah's heart was not full of such praise.

¹ "It is irrational for a Gentile believer to be anti-Semitic when the leading heroes of the faith (John the Baptist, Paul, Peter, the apostles, the OT saints, and above all the Savior of the world) were Jewish." Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 97.

² "Some infer that Zacharias was deaf as well as dumb; and this is often the meaning of κωφός (ver. 22), viz. "blunted in speech or hearing, or both" (7:22). But the question is not worth the amount of discussion which it has received." Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Luke*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark International, 1896), 36.

Zechariah was praying inside the temple when the angel Gabriel appeared and spoke to him and told him that he was to have a son. But rather than responding with joy and belief, Zechariah responds with cynicism and doubt.

As a consequence for his unbelief, Zechariah is stricken mute. He is unable to speak. For Zechariah, the time that passes between his vision of Gabriel and the birth of his son is a time of silent reflection and repentance.

Zechariah is a good man, but he failed to trust God at a crucial moment. God then disciplines him. But God's discipline does not destroy Zechariah. Rather it leads him to repentance, obedience, trust, and deep devotion.

It is important to know there will be times when God disciplines us because he loves us. This is not a pleasant truth, but it is a hopeful truth. As the book of Proverbs says, *"My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights"* (Proverbs 3:11–12, ESV).

Advent is a good season to look at our suffering and ask the question, "Lord, what are you teaching me in this season. How might my suffering bring me to a deeper level of faith, obedience, and loving worship?"

As Zechariah holds his infant son, his heart is full of true faith. His true faith leads to true obedience, and he names his son John, in accordance with the word of the Lord, spoken by the angel.

And then, what do we see? Restoration. As Zechariah comes into agreement with God's plan and purposes, his tongue is released. And it turns out he has something to say.

With someone forced into silence that long, we might expect to hear words of bitterness. But instead, we hear words of "Benedictus" and blessing.

2.) The Restoration of Israel

Zechariah had once thought he was forgotten and forsaken by God. As an old man, he was childless. Perhaps he once thought that God's people had been forgotten and forsaken by God too. As Zechariah and Elizabeth had been without a child, the Jewish people had been without a kingdom.

But now Zechariah sees things differently. As God had visited and redeemed Zechariah and his wife, he now knows that God is getting ready to visit and redeem his people (Lk. 1:68).

For Zechariah, John's coming signifies that God was getting ready to fulfill his promises.

For this reason, the old priest launches into song: *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David”* (Luke 1:68–69, ESV).

The “horn of salvation” is an image of strength and power³, and this power is related to the house of David. This is a reference to the dynasty of kings from the golden age of the kingdom of Israel. David was the great king who established this dynasty, but centuries ago, that dynasty came to an end. But Zechariah’s prophecies that a day is coming when the house of David will be restored. In other words, not only is salvation coming – a king is coming! God’s people had been weak for so long. Now the strength of God is coming

Let’s keep tracking through this song, picking it up in verse 70: *“as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us”* (Luke 1:70–71, ESV).

The “prophets of old” refers to the Old Testament prophets and the message they proclaimed. Now, when we hear the word prophet, what we think about is someone who is able to predict the future. And although the Old Testament prophets did, at times, predict future events, prophets are not primarily predictors. Rather, Old Testament Prophets were representatives of God’s covenant with his people.

When God chose Israel to be his people, he made a covenant with them. If Israel was faithful to the covenant, they were to be blessed. If they were not faithful to the covenant, they would experience judgment.

So, when the kingdom of Israel fell into idolatry and wickedness, God sent divinely commissioned representatives to remind his people of the terms of a covenant. These covenant representatives were called prophets.

On behalf of God, these prophets spoke words of warning and words of woe. Think about a prophetic warning like a very scary demand letter you would receive from an attorney: “Cease and desist, or else there will be legal action and (likely) legal consequences.” A prophetic word of woe is more like a pronouncement of judgment: “You have been warned. You have been found guilty. Now you will be judged and bear the consequences of your actions.”

Sadly, Israel was faithless to the covenant. As such, they endured judgment. Their kingdom was destroyed. They went into exile. And even after they returned to their homeland, they had to endure centuries of silence from God.

However, as the prophets of old foretold judgment, they also foretold that God would bring about a restoration greater than they could ever imagine. As Isaiah proclaimed:

³ “For this use of ἐγείρω comp. ἤγειρεν Κύριος σωτήρα τῷ Ἰσραὴν (Judg. 3:9, 15). In Ezek. 29:21 and Ps. 132:17 the verb used is ἀνατέλλω or ἐξαντέλλω (see table). The metaphor of the horn is very freq. in O.T. (1 Sam. 2:10; 2 Sam. 22:3; Ps. 75:5, 6, 10, etc.), and is taken neither from the horns of the altar, nor from the peaks of helmets or head-dresses, but from the horns of animals, especially bulls. It represents, therefore, primarily, neither safety nor dignity, but strength.” Plummer, 40.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (Isaiah 40:1–2, ESV).

As Zechariah witnesses the birth of his son, he sees that this age of restoration is beginning. And why is this promise of restoration coming? Because of the ancient promise – or covenant – that God made with Abraham.

Let’s look back at the text, beginning in verse 72: *“to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days” (Luke 1:72–75, ESV).*

I cannot begin to stress how important God’s promise to Abraham is to the storyline of the Bible. But for today’s purposes, the covenant God made with Abraham means that God has a plan for redemption, and he is faithful to keeping his promises, even if he is the one who has to pay the cost.

Now, Zechariah stands at a moment in history, where the tide is about to change.

The Jewish people have been gathered again. The land has been restored to them as a place for them to live. But the people and the land are still under the dominion of tyrants like the Caesar of Rome.

One last piece of God’s plan needs to take place: the true king needs to come. Now God is sending that king, the seed of Abraham, the heir of David, the fulfillment of prophetic hope.

Hope is essential to our lives. To live with any sense of purpose or meaning, we have to have hope – a vision of a better future around the corner.

The Jewish people had a hope, and even though most of them didn’t recognize it at the time, that hope was revealed completely in Jesus. As Theologian Vern Poythress writes: *“The Old Testament thus reaches out in longing for Christ who brings an end to its frustrations and brings to accomplishment its promises.”⁴*

What are your hopes? How might Jesus be the unexpected but truest fulfillment of your hope?

3.) The Restoration of the Nations

Zechariah sees his infant son as the harbinger of the one who will bring forth the restoration of all things. John will be a prophet who will prepare the way of the Lord.

⁴ Vern S. Poythress. *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1991), 43.

Even though John's birth is the occasion of Zechariah's song, he is not the point of the song. John's life is meant to point the greater glory of God.

Look at the conclusion of Zechariah's song: *"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace"* (Luke 1:76-79, ESV).

That phrase near the end of this song "to give light to those who sit in darkness" is not just a poetic metaphor. Zechariah is quoting Scripture. Specifically, he is quoting from Isaiah 9, which is a prophetic picture of the one for whom John the Baptist will prepare the way.

This is a section from that passage: *"But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone...For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this"* (Isaiah 9:1-2;6-7, ESV).

The king of spoken of in Isaiah 9 will hail from "Galilee of the nations." This was a surprising notion in Isaiah's time, especially since the king of Judah live in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was also the place where future kings of Judah would come from and should come from.

But the true and better king will come from Galilee of the nations. Why? Because all though God's plan of redemption was to come through Israel, his plan of redemption was never intended to be limited to just Israel. God's plan A of redemption was always for Israel and the nations.

This means that salvation means much more than just the political deliverance of the Jewish people. And we need to appreciate how big of a paradigm shift this is. In the first century, salvation wasn't a spiritual concept, but a political one. The Jews of the first century thought that they needed to be delivered from the tyranny of Rome. What the Jewish people needed and what all people truly needed was deliverance from the tyranny of sin.

As Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit proclaims, the way of redemption and salvation is only made possible only through the forgiveness of sins (Lk. 1:77).

How will this forgiveness take place? Through the king of Isaiah 9, the king for whom John the Baptist, Zechariah's son, will prepare the way.

He will be a good king and a true king, a king whose kingdom will have no end. This means his reign is not limited to the ethnic people group of Israel. Rather, God's restorative rule is for all nations (cf. Ps. 67).

Jesus is the king who shines light into the darkness. He is a king, not only for Israel but for God's people from all nations. He is a king who will not display his power through conquest, but rather through a cross. He is the king who has made a way to end the power of evil without ending us.

Sin came into the world through our rebellion against. As a result, there was discipline and judgment for sin. Then there was silence. But the hope of restoration has come and is coming through the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

You may feel like you have experienced discipline and silence from God in your life. But the hope of Advent is that though we experience darkness, the light will dawn. Though our sins are many, his mercy is more. As the Psalmist sings, *"For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning."* (Psalm 30:5, ESV)

So, Redeemer Christian Church may we place our hope in the one who is our restoration and vindication. The Lord will restore his people and bring salvation for all nations.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1.) *Read Luke 1:57-80 and summarize this passage in your own words.*
- 2.) *Zechariah wasn't able to talk for nine months because he failed to believe what was promised by the angel of the Lord (see Lk. 1:19-20). However, when John is born, we witness Zechariah's repentance and restoration. Have you ever experienced discipline or correction from the Lord that has led you to repentance and growth?*
- 3.) *Zechariah's song references Old Testament figures like Abraham, King David, and the Prophets. In what ways is Jesus Christ the fulfillment of the hopes of the Old Testament? How might Jesus be the fulfillment of your deepest hopes?*
- 4.) *The end of Zechariah's song references Isa. 9:1-7. Read this Old Testament passage. How does Jesus fulfill the promises of Isa. 9? Why are the promises of Isa. 9 a picture of the true meaning of Christmas?*