

THE SONG OF ZACHARIAH
Songs of Christmas
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I read a scripture earlier in the service, the Song of Zachariah. It's found in Luke 1:69-79. I'm actually going to spend very little time talking about the song of Zachariah. The reason why I'm going to spend little time with it is that every song has its background and its context. Actually every song has two parts – its background and the song itself. The matrix, the conditions which made the song, and the song that is sung.

In Zachariah and Elizabeth's case we are given a rich history of spiritual happenings that produce the song. It begins in Luke's story, begins with verse 5 and extends through verse 25 of the 1st chapter. Then picks up again in verse 27 and runs through the end of chapter one.

In this background for Zachariah's song, Luke shares with us six key events or six key principles or truths, which go into the making of Zachariah's hymn. Let me share these with you.

The first truth that Luke gives is he anchors the story within history.

He says in verse 5 "In the time of Herod, king of Judea." The preface does not begin "Once upon a time. The preface does not begin "Long, long ago in a far away time and land there lived..." The story and the song that is about to unfold is not a myth. If it were a myth it would say "Once upon a time" or "Long ago in a far away land." But the story of John the Baptist and the story of Jesus are anchored in history. It happened in real time and real space. It is not the mythology of Santa or Rudolph but it is "In the days of Herod, king of Judea," an historical person, known sacred and secular.

That's the first thing that we have to rejoice over that we read the song. It's not theological fiction. It's not somebody just being poetic because they've had an inner subjective experience. But the whole truth of the gospel is centered in an objective reality.

The second great thing that goes into making Zachariah's song is Luke tells us that during the time of Herod there lived a priest Zachariah with his wife Elizabeth.

Two kinds of people: Herod on the one side and Elizabeth and Zachariah on the other side. We know a little bit about Herod from history. We know that by the time we find him in Luke 1, he's been ruler of Judea of 30 years. He has three more years to go before he dies. He has had 10 wives. He has fathered 15 children. He has murdered his favorite wife and three of his sons. Caesar said of him that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. His administrative and construction accomplishments were formidable. He was a success in terms of what he did politically and construction wise. But his family life was a shambles. He was from the line of Esau and he could never therefore be accepted as a legitimate climate to a throne that belonged to a descendant of Jacob.

Set in comparison over against Herod is Elizabeth and Zachariah. Their reputation is one of excellence. Excellence before God and excellence before man. In fact, Luke tells us that they are both upright in the sight of God observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. Zachariah himself descended from Aaron as a priest had the double joy of being married to a priest's daughter, a not too common event.

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We compare them and contrast them with Herod. Was it the age of Herod? Or was it instead rather the age of Zachariah and Elizabeth.

Walter Bowie gives us this excellent word. He says, “It may well be that many in Israel estimated their time by this man Herod who seemed it’s dominant representative. In every generation men may pass that same estimate. In modern times for instance may think that the age must be mean, cynical and decadent because of what they read in the headlines of newspapers about the cheap or corrupt lives of many who are prominent in politics and the getting of wealth and on the world of entertainment. But meanwhile in Herod’s time there was another sort of person. Quiet and inconspicuous and yet more important than Herod. Men and women who were the core of society and gave it such real wholesomeness as it did possess. Then as always there were the lowly and humble in whom the strength of the present and the promise of the future lie.”

The age of Herod. Was it that age? Or did God have a different estimation of the age? Is it the age of Andropoth or is it the age of the peasant Christian in Russia that God sees and knows. Is it the age of vice chairman Dung in China or is it the age of the person whose heart is tuned into God within some small village dotted in the landscape of China? Is the age characterized by some flagrant extravagant person that we read about in the media? Or is the age from God’s point of view really anchored in the small person who is righteous and blameless in the sight of God.

The historian Will Durant strikes much this same idea when he says, Civilization is a stream with banks. The stream is sometimes filled with blood from people killing, stealing, shooting, and doing the things that historians usually record. While on the banks unnoticed people build homes, make love, raise children, sing songs, write poetry, even whittle statues. The story of civilization is the story of what happened on the banks. Historians are pessimists because they ignore the banks of the river. The newspapers tell us about the river.”

God through his word takes us to a couple of people living on the banks Zachariah and Elizabeth, whose names were never in a newspaper. Who never really meant anything outside of God’s plan. He takes those people, takes them from the banks and puts them in the river of history and runs a river of redemption through all mankind, through all civilization.

Luke is telling us right off the bat who counts with God. It is the righteous and the blameless. It is those who care about God and love God. We must mark our own age with the same kind of sign. The person who counts is not the Herod of the river. God’s not going to mark that time or that age by the name of Herod. He’s going to mark it by the name of Zachariah and Elizabeth and Mark and John and Jesus.

A third strand in this story which goes into the making of Zachariah’s hymn is the heavy trial that has been laid upon Zachariah and Elizabeth.

They were childless and Elizabeth is now past the age of bearing children. I would estimate her probably in her early fifties. Yet they were blameless.

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How can this be? Does not the scriptures say, Psalm 128 “Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in his ways. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house. Your sons will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus is the man blessed who fears the Lord.” Did not Zachariah fear the Lord? Why then were not sons gathered around his table? I am sure there were those Job’s-comforters who must have come to Zachariah and Elizabeth a few times and said to them, “Zachariah we have a word from the Lord we’d like to share with you. My brother, Psalm 128 says that the righteous person is going to have children around their table. You don’t have any children. Ergo, therefore, you must not be righteous. There must be some sin in your life Zachariah, that you have not yet confessed.”

Here is this strange paradox occurring that right at the opening of the third gospel we see a mortal blow delivered to the view that those who really walk with God never know adversity. The childlessness of this couple has nothing at all to do with sin in their life. The scriptures say there is none. It has nothing to do with the lack of faith. It has nothing to do with their failure to please God. They have pleased God. Yet they were childless.

But throughout their decades long trial they had clung to God and they had clung to one another. The eventual birth of John teaches us that our prayers may sometimes be delayed but they are always answered.

How strange that God would work this way! It’s the same way when John is born. His birth is such a happy story of John. I thought as I was reading again of his birth this week that as you think thirty years down the road how this baby’s life ends when he’s a grown man and Herod, this time another Herod (Herod of Galilee) is at a party, it almost seems a stag party. There’s a semi pornographic dance. He’s drunk. In the midst of a drunken kind of a word orders the execution of John the Baptist. Was it because God had abandoned John? No. No more than his parents had abandoned God. They had not. God’s people may sometimes drink a bitter cup. But God’s people know that in the end God always has the last word. God will vindicate his people. It’s the underlying message of the whole Christmas story. God will vindicate his promises. His promises, though delayed will find their answer.

The fourth great truth leading out of the circumstances of the song of Zachariah is that to Zachariah God reveals himself as the great initiator.

Grace flows from a God who always takes the first action towards us. We have a God who does not passively set back and wait for us to move his direction. He moves ours. And when we’re helpless and unable to do anything God moves toward us.

God sends the great angel Gabriel to Zachariah at just the right moment. When you know a little bit about the history of what it was to be a priest in those days, you realize how just at the right moment Gabriel’s coming was.

It’s estimated that in that day there were about twenty thousand priests. Priests of course service only the temple. There was only one temple and you can’t have twenty thousand people working all at once. They’ll get in one another’s way. So the whole priesthood eight centuries before during David’s time had been divided into 24 divisions. From that time except during the time of the exile a division had the responsibility of coming to Jerusalem twice a year. One week in this six months and another week in the next six months.

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We know that Zachariah belonged to the division of Obijah, which was the eighth division. And he would come twice a year. One week at a time. His job would be maybe cleaning the temple. Maybe helping to open the doors. Maybe preparing sacrifices. Maybe skinning sacrifices. Maybe keeping the altar fires burning because they sacrificed thousands of animals a day or week. Maybe cleaning up. Maybe washing the basins that held the cleansing water. Doing any one of a number of things.

Every morning the priests that were on duty for that day met in the priests chambers and they cast lots to determine who would burn the incense in the holy place that day. Twice each day a priest went into the holy place to burn incense which symbolized the prayers of God's people wafting heavenward as the morning sacrifice and the evening sacrifice for all the people was offered to God. It was not the holy of holies. For the high priest went there once a year. But the priests went twice a day – once in the morning, once in the evening – into the holy place to offer incense.

The lot would fall to a priest. Only once in your life could you do that. And many priests never, never got that privilege because the lot never fell their direction. There were too many priests and too few opportunities.

One day, at the right day, the lot fell to Zachariah and for the first time in his life and only time he would get to be in that most sacred place – the highest goal of a priest to be there in that moment.

We don't know if it was in the morning or if it was in the evening. We do know that he went. As he stood before the altar of shewbread and the lampstand the angel Gabriel suddenly became visible to him. This angel who 600 years before had revealed himself to Daniel, now comes. Not 600 years of age, but not having aged at all. But Gabriel the mighty angel of God standing. We do not know how Gabriel entered the room. He just suddenly became visible, which I think if we had eyes to see, there are a lot of things of God that are invisible to us that if God only parted the curtains we would see things visible that are now invisible. God does watch over his people.

Gabriel announces to Zachariah that his prayer has been heard. What prayer had Zachariah been praying for? Some think that he took that moment in his life that one moment when he could stand in that place to ask God one more time for a son. That view is nice and romantic. But I seriously doubt its true. For two reasons:

One is when Gabriel says to Zachariah he's going to have a son he doesn't believe it at all. If you're praying for something your response is no that kind of disbelieving immediately if you're given an answer by a mighty angel right after you prayed it.

Second, it was the function of a priest when he went into the holy place to pray for all the people. It's like when I come as pastor of this pulpit and I lead the congregation in prayer, I'm not going through all the things that I want to see happen in my life or my family. I want to pray on behalf of all the people to God. Because that is my unction as a minister, to corporately represent the people to God at the time of prayer. I think therefore what Zachariah was praying for was something like this, "God, how long? Visit your people. Redeem your people. Save

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your people.” And the angel comes to him and says, “Zachariah, your prayer has been answered. And it’s going to be answered in an unusual way because a son is going to be born to you who’s going to be a forerunner of him who will come who is the answer to all the questions.”

Gabriel’s words about John should give insight not only to Zachariah but I think to every Christian parent.

Notice what Zachariah says about John. Parents, what a tremendous thing to be able to say about a child that is born. That child will be a joy and a delight to you. A child is meant by go to be exactly that, a joy and a delight. A child will be great in the sight of the Lord. It’s the most important greatness there is. There is no other greatness than greatness in the sight of the Lord.

You should keep your child from strong drink and pray for a different kind of intoxication. He will be filled with the Spirit even from birth. Those are good words for today. If prayer for a child will go up to God from the moment of that child’s conception through his or her time in the womb prayer that that child will be filled with the Holy Spirit, that child has a unique chance to fulfill the mission of God for their life. A mission which God has said and its very clear. That prayer was going up for John all the way from his conception through his being carried in the womb, through his birth and adolescence. God is going to answer the prayer of Zachariah.

A fifth thing that is in context of the story is that Zachariah’s unbelieving response did not cut him off from God’s purpose being accomplished.

He didn’t really believe so he was unable to speak until later. But even God’s judgment many times are his mercy. God was going to accomplish his purpose whether Zachariah doubted it or not. He was going to get it done. John was going to be born. But in striking Zachariah for a time without speech God gave him a meditational time of 9 months during which he could create his hymn.

The sixth and the last background event in the making of Zachariah’s song was the naming of his child John. Each of the names in that family had great significance. Zachariah’s name means “God remembers.” Meaning that God remembers his covenant, God remembers his word. And Elizabeth’s name means “My God is an oath,” or literally “My God is an absolutely faithful one.” So the two parents whose names mean my God remembers and my God is absolutely faithful have a child whose name means God’s gracious gift. What a family! What meaning to names!

With the naming of John, Zachariah’s tongue is released to sing his song of Christmas. In the Latin the song is called the Benedictus because that’s the first word in the Latin translation of the scripture. Benedictus for “blessed.” In the Greek it’s praise or to speak well of.

The song is divided into four parts.

Verse 68-70 is thanksgiving for the Messiah.

Verse 71-75 speak of the great deliverance which is coming through John.

Verses 76-77 speak of John himself.

Verses 78-79 speak of the coming of the Messiah.

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I'm not going to attempt to in detail trace those four major points of the song. I just want to reflect a few moments on what its meaning is to us.

First thing right off the bat you see Zachariah's song is you see a faith that is sufficiently mature that he does not dote on his son. That to me is striking. In fact the mention of his son really doesn't come in for maybe 40% or more into the song before he talks about his son. You would think that a parent who had never had a child who was in their 50s or maybe late 50s would be ecstatic with doting on their son. That they would grow the most spoiled kid that had ever been growth. They have a maturity.

His hymn begins with no mention of his son. Instead he praises God for what he is doing through his people. He says God has raised up in the house of David a horn of salvation. Strange term. I wouldn't use this term in describing something God did to call a baby, God's deliverance, a raising up a horn of salvation. But I suppose it's a good term to use if you're in a pasture I there's just you and a big bull. He takes a look at you and decides to chase you. The one thing you're afraid of is his horns. The horns of an animal represent their strength.

A commentator eloquently said just as the power of an animal is concentrated in its horn so all the redeeming power of God that was promised to the house of David will be concentrated in the Messiah's redeemer. All the power that God has promised to bring salvation, to bring forgiveness of sins, eternal life. All that power is concentrated in Jesus, the horn of salvation that comes from the lion of the tribe of Judah that comes through the house of David.

Zachariah knows that God is active because God always keeps his promises. That's why the great first part of this is talking about the fact that God has kept his promise, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham. He remembered his holy covenant.

Scriptural people like Zachariah were very much in tune with faith and knew that when God had promised to do something even though his promises were delayed ultimately he would act. Even as God kept his promise to Abraham so we may be sure that he will keep all his great and exceeding promises toward us. There will not be a promise of God toward his people that will go unfulfilled, unkept. God will keep his word.

Zachariah knows that John will be a prophet to go before the way of the Lord. When John was born the oldest person in Palestine could not remember, did not ever have the experience of even talking to someone who had ever seen a prophet. If a man was a 100 years of age, and when he was a baby, if he had met somebody who that one time had seen a prophet. But that had never happened because no one for generations had ever seen a prophet. And now one was coming. One who would turn the hearts of the children back to their fathers. That is would bring Israel back to the faith of Abraham. Would bring the world back to the faith of Abraham.

Zachariah sees his son in proper perspective. Not more than he will really be. He's not going to be the Messiah. He's to go before the way of the Lord and give his people the knowledge of salvation through forgiveness of sins.

The close of Zachariah's song foresees Jesus coming. It might be well for us to realize that Zachariah already knows Mary. Mary has stayed in their house. He's aware that she's expectant with the Christ child. He describes the coming of the Messiah as one upon whom by which the

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rising sun will come to us from heaven. The word in the King James is very poetic. It's the day spring from high. When you're living in darkness, if you look to the east toward the rising of the sun so Messiah would be as the day spring up. The rising of the sun to bring light to those who live in a land of darkness.

We in southern California do not know what darkness is. I realized this again being down in Mexico this week. We don't know what darkness is. Even at night when I'm asleep when the room is dark I have an illuminated clock. I always have to be able to tell time so I know when I'm waking up. Hardly a moment of my life is spent in complete darkness. But when you're without electrification and the night is black and there's no moon and no stars and the pitch of darkness is deep, what Zachariah has done in his song is reach into that moment and portray the imagery of a small band of travelers that have been on their destination toward a village. The sun has set upon them before they reach their destination. They've had to camp for the night and they had to know the fear and the howling of the animals and the threat of invasion upon them by some foreign element, some beastly element. They would know the joy of seeing the sun coming up over the horizon in the morning. Upon them the light is shining.

And Zachariah says this is exactly what we feel like when Jesus comes into the world. That we've been in a terror stricken world. Men's heart failing them for fear. People not knowing what to do. Wondering what in the world am I here for and what is this about and how is this all going to end and how am I going to get through my problems. But upon them, upon us, the light has shined. Christ has come.

Take Christ out of the world and all will be dark. But put him in the world he leads us in the path of peace.

We're to take Zachariah's song and make it ours. We too are to give praise to God. We're to thank him that he remembers his word. That he delivers us from our enemy. That he gives us salvation through the forgiveness of our sins. That he has let the light of his sun shine upon us.

I understand that the word "religion" comes from two Latin words. The "lig" comes from a word that we get "ligament" from. It means basically "to bind" or "to tie." The "re" is a preposition meaning "back." Or "again." So literally "religion" means "to tie back" or "to rebind" or "to tie again."

This is what John was to do. According to the word of Malachi he was to come to tie back, to rebind.

We've all been separated from God. Maybe you're here today and you're separated from God. Why has Jesus come? To give us religion? Yes, religion in the deepest sense. To tie us back, to bind us back to God.

Our heavenly Father, we thank you for the word of the Lord. We're thankful that we live not only in a time when men's names appear not only in large type in headlines. But we live in a time ourselves of righteous men and women, righteous young people. We thank you that upon our darkness your light has shined. I pray, Lord, for those who feel like they have been cut loose, that there are no ropes holding them. There is nothing tying them to you or to their purpose in life. That by the power of your Spirit Lord, you could we in this moment

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and tie them back to you. I pray too that at this Christmas season something of the wonder and the glory and the meaning of Christmas will be a part of our life. As we live out the next 2 weeks they will be a spiritual feast to our soul. As we think of the glory you have come – the light of the world. Thank you for John. Thank you for Elizabeth and Zachariah. And thank you for all the faithful people in families who prepare the way of the Lord. May his light shine upon us. In the Lord's name. Amen.