

From this morning canticle: “The day shall dawn upon us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace” These beautiful words from the *The Song of Zechariah*, often called the *Benedictus* seem to offer us just what we need as we continue to journey through this Advent season. They tell us that something remarkable is in the works. And it will bring us peace. Peace which can be hard to imagine in a world that seems to be spinning out of control. It might even seem elusive and hard to find in our own personal lives and relationships. But the Holy Spirit uses Zechariah and his words to remind us that there is every reason to have hope that peace will come. And peace does come if we stop, listen and open our hearts.

In the first few chapters of Luke we see that the Holy Spirit is very much at work. Many amazing things are happening. Events occur that bring hope and peace to the people directly involved. But these events will ultimately change the history of the entire world. They will make creation whole again and will make us whole again.

Luke tells us that the events he’s about to describe take place in a particular time in history, the time of King Herod. God has chosen this time to act and has chosen particular people to act through. The old priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, both have deep roots to Israel’s past, but like the patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah, they have been childless into their old age and most likely had given up any hope of having a child.

One day as Zechariah was at the temple fulfilling his customary duty, Luke tells us that the angel Gabriel appeared to him and announced that he and Elizabeth would have a son. Zechariah is shocked and in disbelief and questions the angel’s good news. Now I

don't know about you, but if any kind of angel visited me I'd have a lot of questions. The angel strikes him mute. Zechariah leaves the temple dumbfounded and unable to speak.

In the following months, Zechariah and Elizabeth do conceive. And so does Elizabeth's cousin, Mary. As the narrative continues, Mary visits with Elizabeth, which shows us the importance and deep connection between the two women and their two children but also their connection with Israel's past. It's at this visit that John leaps in Elizabeth's womb as he recognizes the presence of the Messiah in Mary's womb. It is also at this visit that Mary proclaims how blessed she is in bearing the one who will save Israel and the whole world. It's a tender and beautiful moment.

Eventually Elizabeth does give birth. And this brings us to today's canticle. On the eighth day when the child is circumcised and named, the expectation of those present is that he will be named after his father, Zechariah. But Elizabeth pushes back she, seems to intuitively know that his name is to be John, which in Hebrew means *God is gracious*. All look to Zechariah for confirmation, he has been unable to speak for nine months. So he writes on a tablet that yes, the baby will be named John. Luke tells us that immediately his tongue is freed and that he began to speak and praise God. All the people gathered were amazed and began to ask what was happening. It is then that Zechariah filled with the Holy Spirit lays out the prophetic message and the words we prayed this morning: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them."

It's actually quite a story. The wise old Zechariah, a priest with deep connections with ancient Israel, is visited by an angel of God, questions the angel, is made mute and in the nine months following, witnesses the unfolding of the coming of the Messiah. It's as if he

needed those nine months to be quiet and take in all that was happening around him. He was forced to step back and to wait, and to look at life, all that he had personally witnessed, his own past joys and disappointments, but also the joys and disappointment of the whole Jewish people. And there had many disappointment and sufferings in their history. Over and over they had been called to turn their hearts over to God. Time and time we hear them following God, leaning on God as their life source and then turning away and following other gods and their own self centered ways.

Luke weaves into Zechariah's words, the words of the old prophets call, to return to the Lord and repent. It is only then that the people will truly have hope and peace. And God never gives up on his people. And now he sends John to call his people to the ultimate. The Messiah is coming and this needed the people's immediate attention. John becomes a kind of bridge between the world of the old prophets like Ezekiel and Isaiah and a new world of something new and radical.

That sense of immediacy and urgency is heard in today's gospel, where we hear the adult John proclaiming to the people in Jordan "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John echo's the old prophet Isaiah: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" John may resemble the prophets of old in his unconventional dress and behavior and in the call to prepare and return to God, but John's call has a new kind of urgency. The promised Messiah who is coming is already close by and actually in their midst. And he is in our midst.

God, in fact puts himself right in the middle of creation in the most intimate way. And he comes to offer us a new kind of life in him. It's a relationship with him, a relationship

that is as intimate and hopeful as it gets. This was good news in Zechariah's time and is good news in our present time. In our world, peace can seem very remote and it may be even hard for us to have hope. Our world like Zechariah's is very troubled. But in our waiting, if we make the space for Christ in our lives and prioritize our relationship with him, we will experience his closeness and our lives are changed.

If we take time out of the hustle and bustle of the season and like Zechariah, take time out to ponder and reflect on life and the world around us, and focus on the things we need to let go of and embrace the things that matter in our own relationship with God, we might also find peace and joy. In fact real peace won't come unless we become a bit more like Zechariah who had the time needed to ponder his life and the world that was changing around him. It was in this tension and yet quietness that he was able to ground himself in God and was forced to rely on God. In his reliance he became trusting that God was taking care of him and the world around him. It was only then that Holy Spirit spoke through him and will speak in our lives, giving us what we need to create a justice and peace in our own lives and in the world around us.

So Zechariah's song isn't only about the birth of John the Baptist and the coming of the Messiah. It's about God's faithfulness to the world he created and loves. It's about God's constant attempt to draw us closer to him. It's about the Salvation of the world and it's about the promise of peace. This Advent season, it's up to us to slow down, stop and pray and listen with an open heart so that we can trust and welcome God in. It's then that we can work to build a kingdom that points to his peace.

