

INI - SDG

1st Mid-Week Advent Service
December 2, 2009
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church
Hecla, SD

Advent Theme: "How Silently, How Silently, The Wondrous Gift is Given"

Text: Luke 1:5-25

Theme: The Silence of Zacharias: A Lesson in the Promise of Christmas

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heav'n
No ear may hear His coming, But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still, The dear Christ enters in. (TLH 647:3)*

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ Jesus who have come to see this thing which the Lord has made known to us, even the birth of His own Son, our Savior, grace and peace to you,

Celebrations and noise often go hand-in-hand, don't they. On the 4th of July we explode things to mark the birthday of our nation. New Year's Eve is traditionally rung in with noise-makers, banging pots and pans, and singing a rousing chorus of the Scottish song, "Auld Lang Syne." When someone gets married there is usually cheering and singing to mark the special day. We find celebrations such as these as opportunities to be loud and make noise.

Christmas isn't too different, is it. As Christians who know the true meaning and purpose of Christmas, we have added reasons to celebrate loudly on Christmas. Our Savior from sin has been born! God loved us and sent His own beloved Son into the world to save us! And so we ought to lift our voices in singing, "Joy to the world! The Lord has come! Let earth receive her King!"

And yet Christmastime is loud in a different kind of way, isn't it. The world has made this time of year loud with distractions. There are so many different things trying to draw our attention away from the focus of Christmas. We have those Christmas letters to write. We have those gifts to buy. There is that decorating that needs to be done. The long lines at the store frustrate us. This time of year is loud - not just in celebration, but in distraction.

So it is important for us that we set aside these special services to shut out the noise and distraction of this world and silently meditate on the real reason for the season, indeed the only reason for this season - the birth of our Savior, Jesus. Tonight we consider how the silence of Zacharias is a lesson on the promise of Christmas. The words for our mediation tonight are taken from Luke chapter 1, verses 5-25. Verses which we heard earlier in our reading.

Let us begin by taking a look at the person Zacharias. We learn that he was a member of the Tribe of Levi, a descendant of the first High Priest, Aaron, and of the priestly division of Abijah. As a descendant of Aaron, Zacharias himself was a priest. While the Levites were allowed to marry from any of the tribes of Israel, it was considered a special blessing for both a husband and a wife to both be Levites. So it was with Zacharias as he married another

descendant of Aaron, Elizabeth. Luke records that this couple was a godly, believing couple. ***“They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.”*** They were faithful believers who knew and followed God’s Word. They knew His commandments and obeyed them.

If there was one strike against them, it was that they had no children. The people of that time took God’s command to Adam and Eve to be “fruitful and multiply” very seriously. Any married couple that did not have children was almost viewed as being cursed by God. And by the time of our text, they were old and well past child-bearing years. This is the ***“reproach”*** that Elizabeth speaks of in verse 25.

So it was that time came around for division of Abijah to take their turn serving at the Temple in Jerusalem. To give you a reference of time, this would have been just over six months prior to Gabriel’s visit to the Virgin Mary, about fifteen months prior to the first Christmas. In an attempt to avoid bribery and corruption, lots were cast to decide which job would be assigned to which person. God arranged things such that the lot fell to Zacharias to burn the incense in the Holy Place of the Temple on this particular day. This would have been a high honor to Zacharias, as a once in a life time opportunity.

So it was that Zacharias entered the Holy Place at the hour of prayer to burn the incense. Outside, in the temple courts, the congregation would have been offering their prayers. Yet as Zacharias steps to the altar of incense a most unexpected sight is seen! An angel of the Lord standing to the right of the altar!

Troubled and filled with fear, the angel reassures Zacharias that there was no reason to be afraid. He brought good news. ***“Do not be afraid Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.”*** At this hour of prayer, it is made known to Zacharias that his prayer has been heard. What prayer is that? Well for one, the prayer for children. Though Zacharias and Elizabeth had probably been long since given up praying for children, since they were so old. Yet that prayer had been heard and Elizabeth in her old age would have a son.

But there is another prayer that had been heard. There is one prayer that generation after generation of faithful Old Testament believer had prayed. This prayer is summarized in Psalm 53, ***“Oh, that the salvation of Israel would come out of Zion!”*** (Ps 53:6) Much as we pray that the Lord Jesus would return soon, they were praying for the first coming of the promised Savior, the Messiah.

And now the days were fulfilled and this child born of Zacharias and Elizabeth would be the promised forerunner of the Savior. Their son John would get God’s people ready for the arrival of the Messiah. The angel Gabriel announced to Zacharias, ***“For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*** John would get the people ready for Jesus by preaching repentance and remission of sins.

And so this visit of the angel Gabriel to Zacharias was the first earthly announcement that the fullness of the time had come. God was now going to send forth His Son. These are the great glad tidings that Gabriel had come to announce to Zacharias. He was going to have a son and that son would make ready a people, prepared for the Lord!

But listen to how Zacharias responds to the angel, ***“How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.”*** Apparently it wasn’t enough for Zacharias than a spirit-being from heaven was standing there before him. And this priest of the Lord certainly should not have thought that age would have been an issue for God to produce a child. He knew well what God had done for Abraham and Sarah in giving them a child in their old age. Yet Zacharias asks, “Whereby can I be certain that what you say is true?”

The angel responds, ***“I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.”*** A child-like faith would have accepted the words of Gabriel, much like Mary responded, ***“Let it be to me according to your word.”*** (Lk 1:38) But the punishment for Zacharias’ unbelief and doubt in this matter would also serve as a sign. Zacharias would be mute, unable to speak until after John was born.

And so we find in the silence of Zacharias a lesson about the promise of Christmas. Zacharias should have been looking and longing for the coming of the Lord, for that first Christmas. Especially as a devout Old Testament believer and a priest of the Lord, he should have welcomed this announcement from Gabriel. Yet he doubted. He did not see the power of God as being able to accomplish this promise, rather all he saw was old age. Though Zacharias was armed with the glad tidings of the coming Christmas, he was silenced for his lack of faith in this matter.

While we haven’t had the angel Gabriel appear to us, we all have heard the message from the presence of God. We have His Word which is full of His promises to us. Promises like this that He spoke to the prophet Jeremiah, ***“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”*** (Jer 29:11) The Lord has loving thoughts of peace toward us. Plans of salvation and eternal life. Promises to take care and provide for all of our bodily needs. Yet all too often we view things like Zacharias did - with our eyes rather than with a child-like faith.

Consider how Jesus tells us, ***“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’”*** because our heavenly Father knows that we need all these things. A child-like faith trusts that God will provide because Jesus said so. And yet we too should we be struck mute for worrying and doubting that our heavenly Father would provide.

What about something much bigger and important than our daily bread. What about doubting that we are truly forgiven? What about doubting that all our sins have been paid for? What about doubting that because of Jesus’ death and resurrection heaven is our home? Viewing things with the eyes of Zacharias all we see is sin and death around us and in us. We too should be struck mute for doubting the promises of God.

The lesson of Christmas is that God accomplishes every promise He makes. Instead of skepticism and doubt, let us with child-like faith hear and cling to the promises that come from the presence of God. The Apostle John writes, ***“Your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake.”*** (1Jn 2:12b) Or King David who writes, ***“As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”*** (Ps 103:12) Or the LORD God Himself who tells us in Isaiah, ***“Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool.”*** (Is 1:18) Doubt not, but believe the promises of your

Savior-God!

In this noisy season of Christmas, let us silently ponder the promises of Christmas that were fulfilled despite Zacharias' doubt. The seemingly impossible promise that a couple could have a son in their old age. The amazing promise that his son would prepare God's people for the arrival of the promised Savior. Let us with child-like faith ponder and cling to these and all the glad tidings which God made known to us. Glad tidings that begin with the birth of our Savior Jesus on Christmas and end with eternal life in heaven through Him! Praise be to God. Amen.