

The Surprising Way of The Lord / Luke 1:57-79

If I were to ask you to describe for me what a royal herald was like, I wonder what most of us would say. Personally, when I think of a character like that, I think of a younger man who may have lived in the Middle Ages. They are dressed in fine clothing, fit for someone who attends a Kingly court. They are clean and well-fed, enjoying the comforts of castle life, providing a stark contrast between themselves and the peasants around them. Perhaps their voice is booming and commands attention as they cry out with great strength and gusto, "Hear ye! Hear ye!" in the town square. They may be accompanied by a choir of trumpets or soldiers as they let everyone around them know what is to come. Maybe the King has approved some new edict that his subjects need to follow. Or maybe it is the announcing of some great and glorious news like the King's victory in battle or the arrival of a royal heir. Or maybe, the herald is proclaiming the arrival of the King himself, warning those who hear to prepare themselves for the King's presence as he walks amongst his people. Last week, Pastor Ben walked us through Isaiah 40, a prophecy that offered God's people a promise of comfort during a time of great tribulation. It was a promise of God's very own presence coming to His people to reveal His glory to them and so that all the world would know that He is the Lord. And, just as a royal herald goes before his King, the prophet Isaiah also tells us of a herald of the coming of the Lord who will prepare the people for His arrival.

Isaiah 40:3-5

A voice cries:

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

This voice who cries out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord was very much the opposite of the royal herald I described earlier. Instead of wearing courtly clothing, he wore a garment made of camel's hair and a leather belt. Instead of being clean and taken care of, this herald would have appeared unkept and homeless. Instead of being well-fed, his diet consisted of insects and wild honey. I could only speculate but I suppose the man would've looked rather emaciated and malnourished, which wouldn't give him an air of strength and vitality. It is surprising, to say the least, that such a man would be called the greatest among those born of a woman, much less act as the herald of God. He was great not because of his talent, nor was it because of his holiness. He was great because God chose him to be the forerunner to the one who is greater than he, the Messiah. His task was to make straight in the desert a highway for our God. He was the man known as John the Baptist, whose entire life (his birth, ministry, and even his death) pointed to and heralded the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But before any of that took place, the story of the man who would guide others to the light begins with his parents, a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, a couple who were advanced in age and had to endure the heartache of barrenness for many years. But because of their faithfulness to God, the Lord blessed them with a baby and offered Zechariah the first glimpses of God fulfilling His long-awaited promise of a Messiah. While working in the temple, Zechariah was visited by the archangel Gabriel telling him of the baby boy that would one day prepare God's people for His coming; Zechariah's future son who would be named John. For some reason, though, Zechariah doubted this

future plan and so the angel caused him to be mute until the day of his son's birth to serve as a sign that God would cause to pass what he had promised.

Luke 1:57-64

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. 63 And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. 64 And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.

There were several miraculous and extraordinary things that were surrounding John's birth. Things like the advanced age of his parents, or that both Elizabeth and Zechariah had both chosen the same name for their son even though it wasn't a family name and they hadn't spoken to each other in over 9 months. Or also consider the peculiarness of Zechariah not being able to speak but suddenly regaining the ability once his son was named. All of these signs and wonders surely would move any of us to react the way that Zechariah did; he blessed God. But I am convinced that he did so not because God gave him a child or loosened his tongue. I believe that the man blessed God because of what his baby boy represented. In the Old Testament, God spoke through his prophets of a coming time when He would fulfill His covenant promises to His people. A time when the promised Messiah would come into the world and establish Yahweh's rule and reign here on earth where justice and truth and righteousness would shape our world. But then, for 400 years there was nothing but silence from the Lord. No prophet had spoken, no sign had been given, no righteous leader had risen up to lead them to victory. It's easy to see, then, why Zechariah would be incredulous at the news of his son from the angel. Gabriel's proclamation of what the man's son was purposed to be was a clear sign that the Messiah was following closely behind.

Luke 1:16-17

16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17 and he will 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 for the Lord a people prepared."

For Zechariah, this would have been an obvious reference to Malachi 4, a similar passage to Isaiah 40, that prophesied of the first signs of the coming of the Lord to His people. The fulfillment of promises made long ago was happening right before his eyes... For news such as this, what other response is there besides blessing and worshipping the God who fulfills His promises to His people; redeeming them from their shame and preparing them to be ready for His comforting presence? But Zechariah was not the only one who looked at John's life and what it would mean for the world with great anticipation and wonder.

Luke 1:65-66

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.

We can only guess what the people who heard about John's birth were thinking. Would the boy prove to be a new prophet of God? Would he rise up in power and strength to cast down the enemies of God's people? Could *this boy* be the one we have waited so long for? Or will he prove to be something else? What exactly will God be doing with the boy's life? What then will this child be? At that time, the prevailing notion of what kind of Messiah that God would send was one of military and political strength. In their minds, He would be a warrior-king, able to raise up and rally the people of God to fight against and gain victory over their

oppressors. Israel has always had a problem with other nations coming against them and the Romans of that day were just the latest empire to frustrate them in a long list of tyrants. God's people were looking for rescue, and they interpreted God's promises of salvation as being purely physical. But then, as if to clarify to the people what is to come, Zechariah speaks a word of prophecy from God. Imagine yourself in Zechariah's life at the end of the Old Testament, a time of deep distress for the people of God. You have the word of God from Moses and the prophets, you know the promises of redemption God has made, but God has not spoken a new word to His people in nearly 400 years. And that silence has been quite loud lately... You live in a day when Romans occupy the Promised Land and, while these foreigners give you some freedom in worship, you feel the heavy hand of Rome on your life. And the Romans had been in power for nearly 70 years. Before them it was an increasingly corrupt Jewish dynasty; and before them the Seleucid dynasty who had cruelly oppressed and suppressed the Jewish people. A long night of fear has hung over your people for centuries. And on top of that... Now that the Romans are in charge of everything, your work as a priest is done under a high priest who was an appointee of the Romans. The leadership of the temple of the Lord works for the pantheistic Romans. And on top of that... Your work is done in the Second Temple (the first was destroyed more than 500 years prior) and, unlike the first, the presence of God had never come down on this temple. Your work is done in devotion to the Lord, but not done in the presence of Him as it was in the first temple. And on top of that... There's your own heart! You know your own heart and know the deep need of forgiveness that is in you. And while you've embraced the Lord as your hope for life and peace, you also know that things still aren't the way they're supposed to be. You know that because you've heard all the promises of God about redemption and forgiveness and restoration – but you know that those promises are still in search of a resolution – they haven't come true yet. And so, you're waiting and watching and longing for the rescue to happen; for Yahweh to come. All of this is stacked on your heart like stones upon stones and the weight of that distress is crushing. But after everything Zechariah has heard from the angel and now seen with his own eyes, he recognizes...something is happening. He's putting together his own story and the story of Mary, who had lived with Zechariah and Elizabeth his wife for a few months. Mary told them of her baby, who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, whose name will be Jesus, Immanuel, who will be called the Son of the Most High and will sit on the throne of David forever and ever – a kingdom with no end. And so, from Zechariah's lips we hear this announcement from God saying that the time has come and the long dark night is already being overcome by the rising sun. The fulfillment of promises has come at last. This announcement from God is such a gift to Zechariah and his people, but it is also a gift to us today. It's a gift because when we feel the weight of our circumstances on our shoulders, this Word tells us that the Strong Savior has already come to rescue us. When we feel the weight of this World's oppression against us, this Word shouts that the victory belongs to God who has already come and fought for us. When we feel distress over a world that shouldn't be the way that it is and the distress that our own sinful hearts are responsible for all the brokenness we see, this Word speaks to us of forgiveness and mercy and holiness and righteousness and peace – peace! – that been given to us from God Himself. So, hear in this man's worship the message of the Gospel; hear the victory of God promised in the Garden achieved, the redemption promised to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob accomplished, and the restoration promised by the prophets proclaimed as fulfilled. And his own son would prepare the way for the Rescuer to do his work.

Luke 1:67-75

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.

When John was born Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke to the people of God. And after nearly 400 years of silence from the LORD, Zechariah's message was essentially this: "This is it! This is the time in the Story when Yahweh comes, when fear of darkness is removed and the Sun rises. This is the time when everything He promised is breaking through. Everything promised is coming true! This is the time that we've all been waiting for! It's the arrival of the rescue; of the Rescuer who brings forgiveness and peace – the Shalom of God we have lived without for so long. Real peace is here at last." And every word of Zechariah's praise and message is saturated with the word of God from the Story of the Old Testament. These echoes of promises made earlier means that this rescue God sent wasn't a "Plan B," but had been the plan all along. So, what Zechariah was announcing was simply this: The Lord made promises and now He's keeping them. And because He is keeping His promises, we can serve Him without fear in the peace He gives us. And so, the first words out of his mouth are the words of a man in distress who has seen his Rescuer coming. Zechariah says, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel..." That's his starting point. That's the most pressing thing that jumps past his lips because of what he recognizes what is happening. The reality of the coming of the Messiah is cause for Zechariah to celebrate and so he raises his voice to bless and worship his promise-keeping God. Zechariah is your brother who stood on the top of the farthest hill and saw the first light of the dawn of your freedom. He shouts out the arrival of your salvation and so he praises and worships and rejoices in the God who has come to rescue and claim a people for Himself. In the first several verses, Zechariah gives the reasons for his worship. He blesses the Lord God of Israel (v.68) "*for he has visited and redeemed his people.*" When you can't worship and your soul is unsettled and restless, remember that before you could come to the Lord in worship, He came to you. In Exodus 4, it was the LORD who visited His people in their affliction in Egypt. In Psalm 111, it was the LORD who sent redemption to his people and promised a fuller redemption as He spoke through the prophet Isaiah (43:1). Notice the tense of the verbs. Zechariah says, "*he HAS visited and redeemed.*" Now, Zechariah knows that John was just born and Jesus hasn't yet been born. And yet because of what he's seen and heard from the Lord he knows that the redemption of the people of God is as good as accomplished now that the Lord is on the move. Zechariah worships because the Lord (v. 69) "*has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,*" echoing the LORD's promises to King David in 2 Samuel 7 that through David would come a strong, eternal King who would reign forever by the steadfast love of God. The "*horn of salvation*" is none other than God Himself in 2 Samuel 22:3 as David celebrated the strength of the Lord and His power to deliver His people from all their enemies. But none of this is a surprise to Zechariah. He recognized what Yahweh was doing because it was all "as (the Lord) spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old." From the prophets, indeed even from the promise of God to the serpent in the Garden, he knew that the promised salvation would be a rescue of God's people from their enemies and "from the hand of all who hate us." And the rescue would be the display of mercy that was promised to Israel's fathers in the Covenant God had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Zechariah looked back and knew that the Lord's redemption was meant to free the people of God from all fear. And because fear was gone, the people of God would serve their Lord as they were made to do, to worship him, to stand before Him in "holiness and righteousness...all [their] days." Could it be? How could Zechariah, how could any man with a sinful heart stand in the presence of God with holiness and righteousness? It would be possible because the redemption that God was accomplishing through His Son was not merely a military or political triumph that would kick the Romans out of the Holy Land. Zechariah understood that their deepest need, to be reconciled before a holy and righteous God, was the redemption that the Lord had in mind. After praising the Lord for all that He has done, is doing, and will do, Zechariah then turns to his son and declares what task lay before him.

Luke 1:76-79

*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[h] 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."*

He calls him a prophet of the Most High, that he will go before the Lord to prepare his ways just as it was foretold by the prophet Isaiah. If we read further into the life of John the Baptist, we'd come to understand that his ministry was characterized by calling people to humility and repentance. The hills and valleys that Isaiah spoke of that would need to be made level for God to tread upon were actually the hearts of humanity. Those who thought much of themselves needed to be brought low while those who were already low would surely be lifted up. For "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." A heart that is not ready to repent will never be able to see its need for a savior. Furthermore, John will not only make ready for the Lord a people prepared by calling them to repentance, he will point them to the light of salvation. In v. 77, the message that the Lord gave through Zechariah, the mission that his son, John, was sent to perform, was "to give knowledge of salvation to (the people of God) in the forgiveness of their sins...." John will surely fulfill this statement when he points to a man along the bank of the Jordan river and utters this one sentence: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" The salvation that God has brought into the world would reach into the deepest pits of human hearts and rescue people from what they could never free themselves from by force of might or political maneuvering. Because Christ came, there is now no condemnation for you who by faith belong to him. Because Christ came, you don't have to be afraid of judgement. Because Christ came, all the anger, all the lust, all the controlling, all the laziness, all the greed, all the sin that still rages in our hearts is forgiven and removed from us as far as the east is from the west. Hear that Gospel and hold it close to your breast and rest in the light of Christ who has saved you and won your forgiveness by his blood. Your forgiveness comes, v. 78 tells us, "*because of the tender mercy of our God....*" And it is the same mercy that Zechariah understands will cause the "*sunrise (to) 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.*" The image of the sunrise is one of the favorites of the prophets as they saw from afar the coming of the Messiah. You hear it in Isaiah 60,

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."

And again, in Malachi 4,

"But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall."

The sunrise of Christ's coming brings light into the darkness because of His righteousness. The peace that we are guided into is the healing in His wings that brings forth reconciliation between God and man. The arrival of this sunrise chases away the darkness in our hearts and bathes us with the warmth of His life. And it is the knowledge of His coming that can still pierce our hearts with the sudden joy that our God loved us enough to send His only Son into the world that we had shattered with our own sin. He loves us and came to rescue us and to save us. Part of our life together in the Body of Christ is a calling to remind each other that the Savior has come and he has come with forgiveness and grace and peace to us. And each time we forget the Gospel

and fall into sin or sorrow or distress darkens our mind, we have God's Word and our brothers and sisters to remind us of the Gospel so that our joy can return and chase the darkness and fear away once again. It's the life we live – forgetting and remembering; repenting and believing – but there is hope that it won't always be this way. There is hope because this is not the end of the Story. And in Christ we hear more promises from the Lord – promises of more grace as God continues His work in us, promises of eternal life in the age to come when all our grief and pain and crying will be no more. Both now and in the world to come there is the hope of perfect peace, all because Jesus, has come and brought the sunrise of light and peace with him.