

Sermon

“The Canticles of Advent — Benedictus”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, December 5, 2021

Second Sunday in Advent

Malachi 3:1-4

Mal. 3:1 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; 3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 1:67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

- 68 *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
 for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.*
- 69 *He has raised up a mighty savior for us
 in the house of his servant David,*
- 70 *as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,*
- 71 *that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.*
- 72 *Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
 and has remembered his holy covenant,*
- 73 *the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
 to grant us*
- 74 *that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
 might serve him without fear,*
- 75 *in holiness and righteousness
 before him all our days.*
- 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
by the forgiveness of their sins.
78 By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
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.”*

- I. This morning we have one of the most influential canticles of the New Testament as our text for worship.**
 - A. Used daily in order of Lauds**
 - B. One of 6 texts of praise of God in early chapters of Luke — Only one not about Jesus.**
 - 1. This one is about John the Baptist**
 - C. “Benedictus” from first word in Latin “blessed.”**

- II. Recap of the Zechariah/Elizabeth story**

- A. Old. Too old for having babies**

12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” 18 Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” 19 The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 But now, because you did not believe my

words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

B. The Benedictus is what happens 9 months later when Zechariah goes to name his child John - he regains his ability to speak.

- 1. And the prophesy he speaks is a song...**
 - a. About God’s faithfulness.**
 - b. About John’s calling to prepare the way.**

III. This song is a peculiar song for Z to sing because:

A. He and Elizabeth are from the Jewish upper class.

- 1. He is a priest**
- 2. She is descended from Aaron - (high-steeple priests of the time)**

B. Peculiar because it is based on a “song of the poor” which typically announces the reversal of fortunes intended by God.

- 1. Poor and lowly lifted up**
- 2. Rich sent away empty**
- 3. Next week’s canticle from the mouth of Mary is an even clearer example of this “song of the poor.”**

C. How odd that this great priest is struck dumb for such a long time and when he finds his voice again - it is to praise God and to announce that John will prepare the way for God to come and upset the *status quo*.

IV. Let us not miss the miracles present in this scene

A. John is born to a couple who should not be able to produce a baby . . .

- B. Zechariah is able to speak again . . .**
 - C. So it is not surprising that the canticle begins with a litany of remembrance of other times that God chose to enter into the history of God's people and act in ways to shape & preserve Israel.**
- V. Zechariah's name means "YAHWEH remembers"**
- A. God's holy covenant**
 - B. Oath sworn to ancestors**
 - C. To show mercy**
 - D. To rescue us from the hands of enemies**
 - E. To send holy prophets**
 - 1. To wit — little baby John who will grow up to serve God by:**
 - a. Giving knowledge of salvation**
 - b. Teaching about repentance & forgiveness of sin**
 - c. teaching about God's tender mercy which aims to bring us out of this present darkness and into the light of the dawn of God's kingdom of peace.**
- VI. The second Sunday of Advent is often thematically driven by the promise of God's peace.**
- A. God's peace is promised precisely for a world like ours:**
 - 1. Which seems to have so little peace.**
 - 2. Where people even within nations are prone to divide up and attack one another**

3. And the church, though it is the community preserving God's promise of the gift of peace — has, itself, not often been a glad receiver of the peace God gives. I'm put in mind of Samuel Stone's hymn *The Church's One Foundation*:

*Though with a scornful wonder
[We] see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed:
Yet saints their watch are keeping,
Their cry goes up, "How long?"
And soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song!*

- B. "Their cry goes up 'How long?'" sounds like the
1. Great Advent cry *Maranatha* "Come Lord Jesus!"
- C. We too live in a season of yearning and waiting for the peace John came to announce.
- D. We too, struggle to remain peaceful when we are the objects of attacks . . .
1. And yet the Prince of Peace for whom John came to prepare the way by preaching:

"77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

78 By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

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."

Is the Lord whose arrival is anticipated and announced in the season of Advent.

VII. So, a word about Peace since it is so central to the song of Zechariah.

Attributes of the peace we seek:

- † **Never a ‘private’ matter.** We seek peace knowing that we possess it to the degree that all of God’s people possess it. *Their good is our good.*
 - † **Peace is a gift** - it cannot be earned, manipulated, or created. It is God’s gift which we can only receive. We cannot “possess” it in the sense of something that can be bought or sold.
 - † **Peace is a ‘world view’** which necessitates our action in response. Part of the ‘gift’ of shalom is that God entrusts real opportunities for us to participate in attaining the dream of shalom.
 - † Peace is to experience the freedom of belonging wholly to God.
 - † **Peace is relational.** It changes how we relate to our loved ones, our friends, our colleagues, our enemies, our community, our world, and our self.
 - † Peace is the antithesis of driven, calculating, anxious, grasping, hurried, self-directed autonomy.
- A. Let us join Zechariah in remembering the intentions of God for peace, and in joyfully bearing witness to the coming of the Prince of Peace in the child born to Mary!**