

Luke 1:68-79 The Knowledge of Salvation

Today is the last Sunday in the part of the liturgical year known as the “time after Pentecost” which represents life in the Spirit. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, a time of preparation and expectation of the birth of Christ into the world. In between, of course, is Thanksgiving. Today’s reading from Luke’s Gospel is the Song of Zechariah, who was the father of John the Baptist. The story is familiar, Zechariah was given a foretelling of John’s birth that he did not believe because he and his wife Elizabeth were past the childbearing years just like Abraham’s wife Sarah was when the angel came to proclaim the birth of their son Isaac and she laughed. Because of his unbelief he was struck dumb which means he was unable to speak until the child was born and he gave his name in writing, “His name is John,” he wrote, and then he broke forth in song.

John the Baptist, as he was called, led a movement more well known in its time than the movement of Jesus was after it. We know that John baptized Jesus and the tradition is that John was a forerunner, a prophet who came along to prepare the way, set the stage, for the life and ministry of Jesus.

The Song

The song is about redemption, about salvation. The first part of the song speaks of the downtrodden nature of the people of Israel, who had long since been conquered. He praises God for showing mercy, remembering the covenant, “enabling them to serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all their days.”

It is a dream we can all relate to well, because even though we are not all that good at serving God, we believe we should be able to serve without fear and we long for holiness and righteousness. But the song changes in the last four verses and is much more specific to John than to Israel.

“And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercies of our God by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

The Shadow of Death

Most of my life has been spent in places that were remarkably peaceful. I am, however, forced to admit that in some of the places where I have not been things have not been peaceful. As a child I watched television reports about the Vietnam War and I saw the strife surrounding the Watergate scandal. Politics were contentious then as they are now. The main source of anxiety beyond personal concerns was the Cold War, which was always more of a threat than a reality, but it overshadowed everything, as it still does, because it is the threat of annihilation.

Though the economy has always been on shaky ground, life then could be described as a pursuit of pleasure and wealth. We are always tempted to believe our times are worse than previous times and if I remember correctly, come people thought that then. It does seem that we are becoming increasingly impatient and restless and angry and dissatisfied with one another.

Meanwhile we have been unable to hinder in any way the passage of time with its march towards aging and decay and death and we share with the entire human race our need and desire and hope to be delivered from the clutches and death and sin and emptiness. We suffer anxiety that comes from the doubt that there

is such a deliverance even if it is the world's doubt and not our own personal doubt. It wears on us. It breaks us down. No matter the unique circumstances of our lives, we all live together in the darkness of the shadow of death.

Birth

But there is hope. Some of our hope comes from the constant presence of birth all around us. From the birth of Isaac to Moses to John the Baptist, to the birth of our own children, we are encouraged and filled with energy. It has been estimated that there are about 353,000 births every day in the world. That number outstrips the deaths by about 200,000. Of course, there is Christ's birth also that encourages us and gives us hope. Life conquers death.

The Word of Forgiveness

Another source of hope is the forgiveness of sin. Every time there is a failure on the part of one of our leaders, we find an insincerity that mitigates the power of whatever apology they offer. We like to say that if people would simply admit their mistakes and take responsibility for them, America is a very forgiving country. Interestingly, this acceptance of the biblical idea of forgiveness even among the "cultured despisers of religion" means that if America is not a

Christian nation in other ways, it has been powerfully effected by Christianity in this way; we believe in forgiveness, maybe. But what we see all too often on the part of failed leaders is some inauthenticity. We seldom see genuine remorse. Many times their apologies seem driven by the desire to retain power or wealth or merely to stay out of jail. And what we often see is a skin deep kind of forgiveness, the kind which allows us to live and let live but not to love.

The great Christian doctrine of Atonement is built on the concept of the forgiveness of sins as a means of reconciliation with God, who has reached down to us out of divine love. We are meant to see ourselves as accepted and forgiven, *and we are meant to be* reconciled. And having been reconciled with God, we are meant to be reconciled to one another, across all the divides we experience:

Denominational divides
Political divides
Gender divides
Racial divides
Cultural and religious divides

Especially as they are characterized by disrespect and malice. Our failures to be reconciled serve as evidence that we can speak the word of forgiveness but do not know the reality of it deep down.

Forgiveness that leads to reconciliation is to enter into authentic relationships with our “neighbors,” regardless of race, class, religion, sexual orientation, and political ideology or anything else; relationships that are and can be more than superficial only to the degree that we are able to empathize, which means to love without judging, without the desire to change or control or receive anything in return. To enter into these relationships is the knowledge of salvation; is the tender mercy of our God; is the light shining on those in the shadow of death; is the path of peace for which Zechariah’s son came to prepare the way. These relationships are the meaning of life. It is a redemption. It takes a renewal. The redemption itself takes a relationship with the one who followed John.

Accepting him is the way to heal the division in our souls; following him is the way out of the darkness into the light of peace.

Thanksgiving is the attitude the heart learns along the way.

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