

December 6, 2009

## **Luke 1:(57-67); 68-79**

57) Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

59) On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. 60 But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." 61 They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." 62 Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. 63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.)

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

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David,  
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,  
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant,  
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,  
that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness  
before him all our days.

**And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
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."**

Zechariah.

I'm thinking about Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist.

I'm thinking about the father of John the Baptist looking down at the infant with amazement and wonder and saying with a straight face about his baby boy, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them."

John was just eight days old, and being presented in the temple to receive the circumcision, the mark of the covenant with Abraham. It would become terribly important for Zechariah to utter the incredible words full of God's favor and the promise of redemption.

But how did he know?

We can say with historical smugness that Zechariah was correct, but then we know how the baby turned out, and how he grew, and how, at the whim of the mother of a little dancing girl, he would be beheaded in the jail of Herod Antipas. Hardly a fitting end-- it would seem-- for one with such an auspicious start; but far less "unfitting" than the fate that would await the one who followed six months later and was born not in the comfort of the home of a well placed young priest, but in a stable-- and not in Jerusalem, the city of Zion, but in Bethlehem, the City of David.

This is all we need to know about the text. Everything else is all about how this is going to happen, but redemption is the key and it is to the idea of redemption that the scripture calls us this morning. In common English the word *redemption* means no more than this, according to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary...

The first definition is noted as being specific to Christian theology and says that redemption is "*Humankind's deliverance from sin and damnation by the atonement of Christ.*" But let's turn from the stained glass words and review the more practical and everyday meaning. "*The action of freeing a prisoner, slave, etc., by payment: ransom.* Another way of looking at it is, "The action of freeing, delivering, reclaiming or restoring something..."

Note how even the more common definition is full of words that populate our theologies: ransom, freedom, deliverance, restoration.

I've told you before about my condensed Bible and just as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm can be reduced to the first verse, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want," and how the Ten Commandments can be reduced to just one, the First, the one about having no gods more important than or even close to the One God. My theory is that if we can do that do that well and faithfully all the rest is just details; like in Psalm 23, after verse one, all the

rest is details. In this poem about John the Baptist, after the first line, **“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.”** everything else is details.

And as we return to where we began, we should review the awe in Zechariah’s words and consider the consequences of those words for us. Because I believe that Christians have a problem with the idea of redemption. Oh, we toss the word around like last year’s baseball, but I am not at all sure that we are very comfortable with redemption, as though we are somebody’s beaten up old guitar or wristwatch that requires a ticket in order to be redeemed at the pawn shop of eternity. Sounds like something out of the Twilight Zone. But everything is hinged on our pursuit of the meaning of life. In the beginning, we are aware of the quickening, the first flutter in the mother’s womb. What husband and father-to-be among us has not experienced the intimacy of having our hand guided to the beginning of what will soon be “great with child,” and our wives saying, “Feel that?” And we do, and together we smile, and together we hope.

We hope like Zechariah and Elizabeth who, when they shared that intimate moment smiled and hoped, and held each other tightly, and then, a few months later we rediscover Zechariah gazing at the child’s face and speaking of redemption, testifying to the hope, the trust, the belief, the fact, that no, this is not all there is, and that yes, life goes on, and on, and on, and we do not know where or when it will end, and we are humbled in the knowledge that none of that necessarily depends upon us, because something greater than us is in charge here.

Reminds me of a story I heard one time about a boy named Bobby sitting in a high school science class who, when the class was told that if we didn’t blow ourselves up, that some scientists believed that the earth might end as soon as five billion years. Bobby started shaking, he became visibly upset, and when the teacher asked him why he was so upset, Bobby asked him to repeat what he had just said. And the teacher said again, that some scientists theorized that the world would probably end in about five billion years. Bobby calmed immediately and said, “Oh, I thought you said five million years.”

Point is we all want to live forever, if forever meets certain conditions. If it does, then it is called heaven. If it does not, it is called hell. We need, we want reassurance that this is not all there is and that death is merely an apparent end, a sign post directing us to a better place, a place where our loved ones who have gone before await, a place of, well, if not absolute joy forever, at least better than what we have here. Oh and it’s not that we aren’t grateful for what we have here, it’s just that we get so tired and we disappoint or are disappointed. It’s like the two children in the TV ad. The first is asked if she would like a pony and she says yes, and a man gives her a model of a pony. The little girl seemed happy, until the man asked the second girl if she would like a pony, and assuming she was going to get what the first girl got says yes, and a real pony is led out all saddled and ready to ride. The first little girl had been happy with the model pony, but clearly that was by the board when she saw the real pony and realized that it was going to the other little girl.

The model pony was nice, but why didn't I get the real pony saddled and ready to ride? Life is great, but I'm holding out for the real pony!

All of this is at issue in the meaning of redemption. Zechariah was thinking "real pony saddled and ready to ride," but even more than that, all he could think about were the hints and clues of the afterlife from those who had gone before him, and who themselves had never experienced what was to come, at least not while they were writing. But if human existence before redemption is reduced to life in a pawn shop, a wrist watch in a glass case, or a guitar hanging on a wall gathering dust, then redemption looms like a huge blessing, we are taken from a sort of limbo and put to use.

No longer are we simply hanging around waiting or wondering why we didn't get the real pony, or grateful that it's five BILLION years. Redemption then is to be used by God toward God's purpose such that in the end we become a gift to God. I wonder which pony we will be: the model or the real one? Or I wonder if we will simply be useful according to God's purpose in creation.

I really don't care about billions and millions, it matters not whether the pony is a model or saddled and ready to ride. I don't care if the sound is real or if it is Memorex, but I would like to be found useful to God during life as I understand it. It is enough for me, and if all the preachers are right about the rest, that's fine too. I will be happy enough going to my death believing I made some difference, in some small way. Let that be enough for us for the time being, and trust God with the rest.

Let us be useful!