

Prayer of the Day:

Almighty God, you have filled us with the new light of the Word who became flesh and lived among us. Let the light of our faith shine in all that we do; through your son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Verse of the Day:

Alleluia. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. Alleluia. (Psalm 98:3b)

Text: Luke 1:68-75

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: ⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), ⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us— ⁷² to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (NIV84)

Sermon Text:

Zechariah, a priest of God who served in the division of Abijah, is performing his service to God in the Temple burning incense when the improbable happens. An angel stands before him and tells him he and his wife Elizabeth will have a child. Zechariah misunderstands the improbable for the impossible, in other words, He doubts the promise. You see he and his wife are well past the age in which people have kids and Elizabeth is barren, she physically has been unable to conceive a child. He asks for proof and as a result is left mute, unable to speak until the promise of God is kept.

Nine months after he returns home from his service at the temple Elizabeth and Zechariah name their newborn son John. We know him best by his work, John the Baptizer. As soon as the name is given, Zechariah's tongue is loosed and he can speak. And what does he tell us? Doubt having vanished and a fuller trust in God given through the ordeal, now even filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah prophesies speaks (maybe sings – who knows) about Jesus.

As I was thinking about the words of Zechariah, it struck me how much they sounded like words from another well-known priest or pastor as we more commonly refer to them. Martin Luther penned the words of the explanation to the Second Article of the Apostles Creed. Feel free to compare Zechariah as I recite,

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.

Let's clue in on a word both Zechariah and Luther use, "Redeemed". The word literally means to buy back we probably get a far better idea of the meaning of the word itself if we look to another word "Ransom". A ransom is a price paid to redeem someone who has been held hostage by an enemy. Oh, and we'll get to those enemies in a minute but first something is interesting in these words.

Take a look at verse 72. I guess I had never considered this until I paired these words with those of Luther's explanation. For some reason, it jumped out at me. Mercy in all this ransom talk. I have always

gravitated to a simple courtroom meaning for the word Mercy: compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm. Salvation and Redemption seem completely on the button for the person who is being held by enemies for a ransom. But Mercy seems a bit off. It insinuates that the captive deserved the predicament in which they are in.

Ah, but then we do. You see God had repeatedly warned humanity. He told Adam and Eve to utilize the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil as a church around which to gather and worship as they devoted this fruit, and only this fruit, to God. They chose not to and shackled themselves and their offspring with sin. Israel had been given countless warnings, opportunities to follow after God. He even wrote down His laws for them on stone tablets, provided an intricate system of worship, government, and societal norms. What did they do? Chose the shackles of sin and slavery to satan over the freedom God has given in His holy Word.

And before we get too judgmental, what do we do? Given unprecedented freedom to worship God, having been blessed with more creature comforts than any other people in history, forget the accessibility of the printing press, we have the internet with God's Word literally at our fingertips and formatted into movies and memes and what do we do? A survey from 2021 found that 11% of Americans read the Bible daily. Trends in reading habits over four years showed that the majority of Americans never read the Bible. I would add the word vast to a majority as only 29% said they had read it at all. Of course, if you are in your Bible even marginally, then I don't need to tell you that we are no better off than Israel and if put under the microscope of that Word of God, well we find out we choose the shackles of sin and slavery to satan over the freedom God gives on a regular basis. Anger, envy, addiction, lust are just the shackles others struggle to see. Luther correctly asserted *He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature*.

Ah, but don't forget that God has redeemed us. He has shown us His mercy. That's the whole reason Zechariah pours forth these beautiful words. I've always kind of marveled at Zechariah's song. I mean, here is a guy who is holding John, whom he never thought He would see or celebrate, in his arms. Two barren people now parents and what does he want to talk about when his tongue is finally loosed? It's all Jesus.

But then I guess, how could it not be. Four times Zechariah says it, *God has redeemed his people ... He has raised up a horn of salvation ... salvation from our enemies ... to rescue us from the hand of our enemies*. Oh, John will be His forerunner, but he will need him too. Jesus is the hero. He's the one who is going to kick in the door of satan's stronghold to come to the rescue of those shackled and bound in sin. He's the one who will stare down death itself even as He endures it for us. Yes, His blood, His life is the ransom price to redeem us from the confines of the slavery we too often choose for ourselves.

But then freedom isn't really meaningful unless there is something to do? An interesting thing happens with long-term prisoners. When released they struggle to function in a world of freedom. They struggle to handle all the choices that come at them and often will end back up in prison if for no other reason than it is familiar. This is not the case with our God. Notice those final words, *to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days*. The same God who frees us from the shackles of sin enables us through His Word to be useful in our lives and one day to serve perfectly before Him in the glory of heaven.

The more I think about it, the more I see similarities in Zechariah and Luther. Two men who previously were shackled up under slavery of sin whom God would use to be mouthpieces for His church, His people in this world. I guess now that I say it, that pretty much sounds like us too. Dear friends, let us rejoice at the privilege and marvel at the honor God has given us all to proclaim the message that freed us from the shackles of sin. **HE HAS REDEEMED ME A LOST AND CONDEMNED CREATURE. YES, GOD HAS RESCUED ME FROM SIN, DEATH, AND THE POWER OF SATAN. Amen!**