

Second Weekend of Advent (RCL/C)
Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6
December 4-5, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

*In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
to shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:78-79)*

One of our church friends knows I love those Scripture verses, and commissioned this photo of these words inscribed in sand:

the dawn from on high shall break upon us....

It's from a song sung to Baby John the Baptist by his father, Zechariah. This song, a canticle from St. Luke's Gospel, takes the place of the psalm this second weekend of Advent. It's called the Benedictus, because it begins,

Blessed are you, Lord, the God of Israel,
you have come to your people and set them free. (Luke 1:68)

Blessed in Latin is *benedictus*. (The Latin translation of the Bible is called the Vulgate, which means the "common" version, since it was once the "go to" for everyone, until Luther and others translated the Bible into languages people actually spoke.)

I like to picture ancient Zechariah holding his newborn son, a tiny, squirming miracle, the child of Zechariah and Elizabeth's old age. With his birth, hope was reborn in his parents' hearts. You may remember the story of the Visitation, when pregnant Mary went to visit even **more** pregnant Cousin Elizabeth. As Mary approached, the babe in Elizabeth's womb "leaped for joy" at the proximity of his Savior in Mary's womb! 'Doesn't sound like the initial butterfly flutters of a baby stirring within, but more like the jumping-on-an-internal-trampoline of later pregnancy!

Classical artists loved to draw or paint Jesus and John together as babies or as toddlers. Artistic clues to John's identity include his wearing a little 2T or 3T-sized camel's hair garment,

and his holding a child-sized staff with a cross on the top. Often there's a lamb in the picture with toddler or pre-school-aged Jesus and John, reminding the viewer of adult John the Baptist's crying out when he saw Jesus approaching: *"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29)

Proud papa Zechariah gratefully remembers his baby son's God-given calling:

*And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way,
to give God's people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins. (Luke 1:76-77)*

Forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness, the gift of God's mercy to us, the healing of all that is broken: the mending of our fractured relationship with God, the forgiveness of our infidelities to each other, the replacement of self-loathing with self-esteem, the reweaving of humanity into the fabric of the creation we've torn and tattered.

In the Gospel we hear how *"the word of God came to [the adult] John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...."* (Luke 3:2b-3) I've wondered whether Zechariah and Elizabeth were still alive or already dead when their countercultural son left civilization to live a solitary, monastic existence in the no-man's land of the wilderness of Judea, sometimes referred to as the desert. By the time he grew up, how clearly would they have remembered his vocation to be "a voice crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord"? Would they have understood that message literally or tried to convince their cherished son, their only child, that he could prepare the way of the Lord closer to home, in less extreme ways, in more comfortable circumstances? We don't know what Zechariah and Elizabeth **thought**, we only know what John **did**: he took the word of the Lord quite literally and very, very seriously! He was so committed that he eventually went to the home of scary Herod (whom Jesus referred to as "that fox") and told him he'd had no right to

marry the wife of his divorced brother. He must have known that would be a tough pill for Herod to swallow – and sure enough, Herod’s response was not to repent but to imprison John and ultimately have him beheaded.

But that’s Herod. What about us?? I **am** baptized (as Dylan is this weekend!) and every time I receive the gift of Holy Communion I receive a new sacramental infusion of life, forgiveness and salvation. But I still need grace to look at my life through God’s eyes and see what’s amiss: the **good** acts and attitudes that are lacking, the **bad** acts and attitudes that are all too present. In what ways am I still sitting in darkness, even though light should have dawned? How am I serving my own agenda rather than the Lord’s? What lesser priorities are leaching my time and energy away from love of God and love of neighbor?

Maybe the simpler questions are: for what do I need to ask forgiveness today? From whom (other than God) do I need to ask forgiveness today? To whom do I need to offer forgiveness today?

What failures in love on my part am I refusing to recognize? Of whom am I too proud to ask forgiveness? Toward whom am I so angry or so hurt that I refuse to forgive? There are so many layers of forgiveness to think about. This may sound strange, but it’s legit to ask: am I angry with God for something bad that happened to me or a loved one? Do I need to “forgive” God? Or am I **so aware** of my failures in love that I can’t imagine I deserve forgiveness? If so, that’s right. None of us deserves forgiveness: that’s why forgiveness is a gift of God. It comes under the umbrella of grace: the love of God that comes to us as a gift not a reward. We Christians can see GRACE as an acronym: **God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense**.

Dr. James Forbes was my preaching prof at Union Theological Seminary in NYC, before he became senior minister at Riverside Church. He is a wise, kind, courageous, faith-filled man. He was interviewed about “Forgiveness in Christian Perspective” and he had this to say:

...the best way to begin to talk about forgiveness is not to tell folks to forgive their enemies. That’s hard as the beginning point. First let them think about how much forgiveness God has had to grant them from their childhood up to their level of maturation. They have had to make withdrawals from the Bank of Grace many, many times. So let’s just help people to ask, “How much forgiveness have you needed in order to get up and go through your life without an inordinate fixation on the guilt and shame of your past?” That’s a good place to begin, because as the prayer says, “Forgive others, and if you don’t forgive others neither will your heavenly Father forgive you.” ... Really what it says is that people who are not willing to extend forgiveness will close off the channels of forgiveness when they need it.¹

From God’s perspective, Heaven’s channels of forgiveness are wide open. They are not constricted like clogged arteries, they are not a trickle like a river drying up from drought, they are a full-on tidal wave of grace, streams of living water that first drenched us in Holy Baptism and that can quench our thirst every time we receive Holy Communion. Along with faith-filled and proud papa Zechariah, let’s praise God:

***Blessed** are you, Lord, the God of Israel, [the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ],
you **have** come to your people and set them free.
You **have** raised up for a mighty Savior...
In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high [**has** broken] upon us,
to shine on [us] who [dwelt] in darkness and in the shadow of death,
and to guide **our** feet into the way of peace.*

Amen.

¹Rev. James A. Forbes, “Forgiveness in Christian Perspective,” in Kenneth Briggs’ *The Power of Forgiveness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), p. 119.

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