

Advent II (RCL/C): "Dawn and Christ-Light"
Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6
December 7, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

This 2nd weekend of Advent we hear Zechariah's beautiful song (canticle) in place of a psalm. On Advent IV we'll hear Mary's powerful song, the Magnificat. (Both are from the first chapter of St. Luke's Gospel, my favorite, which we'll be hearing from all year.) These two Biblical songs are so beloved, so important, that they appear every day in Morning and Evening Prayer. The day is begun with Zechariah's Benedictus and ends with Mary's Magnificat, which we sang last Wednesday in Holden Evening Prayer and will sing again this coming Wednesday, 7:30 p.m.

The backstory to Zechariah's song is the birth and circumcision of John the Baptist, Zechariah & Elizabeth's son. John is the child that Zechariah & Elizabeth had given up hoping and praying for, after long years of infertility. You may recall how Zechariah was serving in the Temple when the angel Gabriel appeared and announced he & Elizabeth would be having a son, whom they should name John. Do you remember Zechariah's reaction?

"Are you kidding me? As I'm sure you know, we tried, unsuccessfully, for years. What would have been the nursery is now my home office! Elizabeth can barely carry the groceries, no less a baby!" Gabriel is not amused. He says to Zechariah, "You're not believing God, huh? Fine. Mum's the word for you until after the child is born. Goodbye."

Fast forward. The child is born, as promised. 8 days after the baby arrives, it's time for the circumcision and his naming. Zechariah is still struck dumb and can't speak, so the male relatives step in and announce that the child will be called Zechariah after his father. Elizabeth asserts, "No, his name will be John." The group gathered 'round shares the opinion that the little woman doesn't know what she's talking about "and who asked her opinion anyway?" They turn to Zechariah and ask him to weigh in; he's "the guy," after all. He gestures that he needs something to write with, then jots down, "His name is John." (Luke 1:63) St. Luke reports:

⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God... ⁶⁷[He] was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

*⁶⁸"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 child David...."*

Zechariah says that God is about to fulfill the divine promise of a Messiah, and his own child John:

*⁷⁶...will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
⁷⁷to give God's people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.*

As we heard in today's Gospel, John (whom we call the Baptist), once grown, did indeed go "... into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins..." (Luke 3:3) John tells people, "You're guilty!" because if we **weren't** guilty of sin, we wouldn't need a Savior. And unless we recognize and acknowledge those sins, deeply regretting our failures in love toward God, neighbor, and self, we won't be asking for forgiveness and we won't be on its receiving end. Zechariah couldn't know that his son John would be beheaded for pointing out the sin of Herod and the former sister-in-law, current wife, Herodias. Nor could he know that the mighty Savior for whom his son prepared the way would die on Calvary: the Passover Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. The promised Messiah, son of David, would live and die about as far away from the splendor and honor of His forebear King David's court as you could get. The promise was being fulfilled, but in unexpected, shocking ways, involving more poverty than pomp, more confrontation than courtly decorum, with emphasis on God's kingdom, not Israel's sovereignty.

Zechariah's song reaches a crescendo with two of the most magnificent verses in all of Scripture:

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

The 1st century darkness God's dawn was going to dispel wasn't just Roman occupation of Palestine. Then and now, God's dawning can also dispel sin, consequences of sin like war, and ills that plague humanity, like poverty and disease. After Jesus' birth there was still plenty of all that ugliness, just like

there is today, but dawn breaks wherever God's love reigns, through those who recognize, regret and repent of their sin, receiving forgiveness, and in turn loving God and neighbor.

God loves us and the entire creation, all the way to God's core.

*⁷⁸In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us...*

That **compassion** doesn't just live in God's heart, it lives in God's gut. The word for *compassion* here is the same as the word for *viscera* or *bowels*. God loves so completely that God sends the Son, the only Son,

*⁷⁹to shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

If that light shines **upon** me, it is meant to shine **through** me to others. Albert Schweitzer, doctor, theologian, missionary and musician, once wrote:

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.

When we see pictures of Baby Jesus in the manger, He is always bathed in light. Often Mary & Joseph sport halos, coronas, crowns of light – signifying God-light, holiness, emanating from them. The Holy Spirit enables each one of us, too, to shine with Christ-light. **It's actually our job as Christians, to herald the dawn and to shine with Christ-light:** that's the vocation, the holy calling, not just of pastors, but of every Christian, regardless of how old you are, where you live, what you do for a living, whether or not you're a little kid, a student, do or don't work for a living, or are retired. *"The Light shone in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"* (John 1:5), we hear in the Fourth Gospel, written decades after Zechariah's Benedictus. The darkness has not overcome it because our mighty Savior died and rose again, and has sent His Holy Spirit to ignite Christ-light in us.

If you're thinking, "Clearly you don't know me well enough to realize that there's **no way** I'm shining with Christ-light," I'd ask, how are you so sure? Maybe you're encouraging a depressed co-worker. Maybe you're shopping for an elderly neighbor. Maybe you put in a good word for the relative everybody else judges harshly. Maybe you go out of your way to sit with the new or unpopular kid who

otherwise would be alone in the cafeteria. Maybe you resist the temptation to lie or cheat on a test or in your marriage. And if you're **still** sure there's not a single watt of Christ-light escaping from you, ask yourself why and pray for grace to start glimmering. Dawn comes gradually. It's not governed by an on/off lightswitch. It's more like a rheostat, a dimmer switch that can be adjusted to brighten things ever-so-gradually.

We live in a great place to celebrate Advent because light and darkness are so dramatic in December at the Shore. This Advent let's all pray that our Christ-light wattage increase, encouraging those around us by being light-bearers. Let's hold old, glad Zechariah's song of praise and prophecy close to our hearts, and maybe cut it out and tape it to our bathroom mirror, tuck it into our wallet, or stick it to the fridge so it can en-**courage** us and we can commit it to memory:

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

Let's also keep in mind Schweitzer's call to gratitude:

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.

Think on these things.
Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham