

**"PROMISED LAND, PROMISED TIME"**

**Ist Week in Advent**

**Luke 1:67-79**

**December 2, 2018**

Then Zachariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,

*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;*

*he came and set his people free.*

*He set the power of salvation in the center of our lives,*

*and in the very house of David his servant,*

*Just as he promised long ago*

*through the preaching of his holy prophets:*

*Deliverance from our enemies*

*and every hateful hand;*

*Mercy to our fathers,*

*as he remembers to do what he said he'd do,*

*What he swore to our father Abraham—*

*a clean rescue from the enemy camp,*

*So we can worship him without a care in the world,*

*made holy before him as long as we live.*

*And you, my child, "Prophet of the Highest,"*

*will go ahead of the Master to prepare his ways,*

*Present the offer of salvation to his people,*

*the forgiveness of their sins.*

*Through the heartfelt mercies of our God,*

*God's Sunrise will break in upon us,*

*Shining on those in the darkness,*

*those sitting in the shadow of death,*

*Then showing us the way, one foot at a time,*

*down the path of peace.*

*In the voice of Zechariah, the prophet:*

*These are dark times for the people of God. We are a people excluded and terrorized, outcasts in the Roman world. We have no power. We have no voice. We have no wealth. We have no land of our own.*

*But we have our Temple and we have our sacred ways. Thank God for that. Without the Temple, I would have no place, no calling. By virtue of my wife's heritage, descended directly as she is from the house of Levi of the 12 tribes of Israel, it is my place in life to be a temple priest, a guardian of the Word of God, a centurion of our faith.*

*Once every so often, my name comes up as the one who is to go into the Temple of God and light the incense. Not everyone can go inside. Only our people, the people of the tribe of Levi and of the house of Aaron, are allowed to tend the flame. Our name, Aaron, means "priest," so like my father-in-law and his brothers and sons, I am a Temple priest.*

*I am the priest Zechariah, and my wife is Elizabeth, of the Judean hill country. She is warm and wonderful, my companion and the light of my life. It has been written of us by Luke that, "together they lived honorably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God." It's nice to be thought of that way.*

*Our Lord God is good, good in all things.*

*We have a strong and long marriage, though over all the decades of our life together, we were never blessed with children. Our barrenness was a sad pall that draped as heavy, dark fabric over our lives for in our culture, having children is a blessing AND an expectation. The Aaronites must have children to extend their bloodline and Temple purity. It is our duty and our honoring of God that causes us to want children of our own.*

*Alas, we always thought it was the Good Lord's will that we were not blessed so. I would never leave Elizabeth, and she would never leave me until the angels one day would come here and carry one of us home. I suspect it will be soon now, as our bones ache each day and our eyesights grow dim.*

*Our Lord God is good, good in all things.*

*Let me tell you the truth about the miracle that happened in our lives. Maybe you have experienced your own God-given miracle, but here's mine. It's proof that you are never too old for redemption, for new life:*

*It was my turn to light the Temple incense.*

*The faithful congregation waited outside, praying to the Lord. I was going about my priestly duties when all of a sudden, an angel appeared to the right of the altar, startling me. I froze with fear and in awe of it. The angel said something like this:*

**“Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you. You are to name him John. You’re going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you-many will delight in his birth. He’ll achieve great stature with God.**

**He’ll drink neither wine nor beer. He’ll be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment he leaves his mother’s womb. He will turn many sons and daughters back to their God. He will herald God’s arrival in the style and strength of Elijah, soften the hearts of parents to children, and kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics—he’ll get the people ready for God.”**

*How in heaven did the angel know our names? I couldn’t believe what I was hearing! Wouldn’t you be flabbergasted as was I if an angel suddenly popped into your day and offered you what you had been hoping for your whole life?*

*We Jews had been hearing of a promised land and a promised time for generations. I didn’t care about all that— (well actually I did; my people had been denied for their rightful place in the world time and again and I wanted for us that we would have our own home and our independence!) But in my personal life, in our personal lives, Elizabeth and I had always hoped for children. Now though, we were old and well past our child-producing years.*

*So, I balked at what the angel was telling me. He came back strongly at me, identifying himself now as Gabriel, God’s own*

*sentinel. I knelt in awe in in my disgrace for challenging the very face of the Lord. And in the Lord's own house, too!*

*Gabriel leaned over my bent and kneeling body, assuring me that he was sent specially to bring this glad news.*

*Our Lord God is good, good in all things.*

*Then he pronounced a judgment upon me, saying, "Because you won't believe me, you'll be unable to say a word until the day of your son's birth. Every word I've spoken to you will come true on time-God's time."*

*And then Gabriel was gone, and I was left alone, unable to open my mouth or move my tongue. After a time spent in disbelief and prayer inside the Temple walls, I emerged but was unable to talk. Luke says I started using sign language! I don't remember that, but maybe I did use some rudimentary gestures to let the others know what I was experiencing.*

*I heard someone exclaim, "He's had a vision of God!" But sure enough, when my priestly duties were concluded, I rejoined my wife. She was perplexed that I could not talk. I could only draw simple pictures and use hand gestures to let her know what had happened to me.*

*Not long after, Elizabeth showed signs of being pregnant.*

*Our Lord God is good, good in all things.*

*We were both confused and elated. "How could this be?" she kept asking me, and I kept throwing up my hands and gesturing a prayer. I don't know if it was because I was not talking or because she was overwhelmed by her story, but she left and went off by herself for about five months. I just let her be. Decades together taught me that when Elizabeth needs her own time, I should let her take it!*

*While she was gone, I prayed in my head day and night and night and day.*

*Our Lord God is good, good in all things.*

*I prayed for her. I prayed for us. I prayed for understanding, and I prayed for strength. What was I going to do with a son? I knew NOTHING about parenting. I did not understand why the Angel Gabriel had visited to me and answered my hopes. What did God expect of me?*

*Have you ever wondered what God expects of you? We all have our prayers and in them, our hopes are all wrapped up tightly inside. We say, "Glory to God in the highest and thank you God for all the blessings of my life and so on, but we REALLY, REALLY are just making small talk with God, I think, until we get up the nerve to spit it out-- our hopes, our dreams, and our desires! I mean, we breeze through our thank-yous and our paltry confessions and our wishes for world peace, but what we can't wait to get to with God is what God can do for ME! God is really near and dear to us when we want something*

*or when we are angry with God about something that has happened in our lives that we don't like, or when God has fallen short of our expectations! I'm just being honest with you. It's just a human failing.*

*What is it that God wants of us? That's the real question, the real prayer. I wanted a child—more than anything- Elizabeth, too, but now that we were having one, what did God want-what did God NEED from us? Gabriel gave us some clues. This is what he said to me that day about my son:*

*He said that his name would be John. Not Zachariah after me, but John. He would be a special child, not like the rest of the hill country children. My child would be of pure heart and spirit, not tainted by the trappings of this world. He would not grow up to consume liquor or crave land or a home or a wife or children for himself. He was to be set apart for God's own purpose, an evangelist sent out into the wilderness of the unbelieving world to bring God's own children back to God. He would be a herald to a new way of being, a new way of being with God in the world. Gabriel said, and I remember these words so clearly, "He'll get the people ready for God." He was to get the people READY FOR GOD.*

*Our Lord God is good, good in all things.*

*My son. God's son. That's what God wanted from us. God wanted us to consecrate our son for a higher purpose, and you know what? It was only fair. It was our 'promised land, promised time'*

*experience. Our faithful response to the fulfilment of our hopes and dreams was to say a resounding "YES" to the Lord.*

*After all, the story of my people—the story of your people as well as mine—is a story about desires, hopes, and dreams. I heard a wise man sum it up this way:*

The story begins with God's desire for a good and beautiful world, of which we are a part. Soon, some of us desire the power to kill, enslave, or oppress others. Enslaved and oppressed people hope for liberation. Wilderness wanderers desire a promised land where they can settle. Settled people dream of a promised time when they won't be torn apart by internal factions, ruled by corrupt elites, or dominated by stronger nations nearby. Desires, hopes, and dreams inspire action, and that's what makes them different from a wish.

*(Brian McLaren, We Make the Road by Walking, 63)*

*I think we create what God wants when we change our wishes into action. I think when we hope, we move forward, when we desire something, we work towards it. I think when we dream of a new world, a world belonging again to God, we move in our waking hours towards making that dream a reality.*

*That's why you are here in a church listening to my story. I think that's the hope that Luke was trying to give a lost people, a hope that God had not abandoned their prayers, but instead had heard their need and their desire to honor God and to serve God. Prayers spoken as hopes and dreams and desires inspire us how to reach them, focus*

*them into serving God's will for our lives, and breathe life into them to make them become a reality.*

*God answered by prayers by giving me a son. And when we named him, John," as we were instructed, our family and neighbors took our story to heart and were wondering, "What will this child become? Indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon him."*

*That very day, God restored my ability to talk, my voice that now will be used to build up God's kin-dom. I now know that the Lord's desires that humankind be close, in lockstep. I was to be a prophet henceforth. Brian McLaren describes my calling this way:*

*Prophets in the Bible have a fascinating role as custodians of the best hopes, desires, and dreams of their society. They challenge people to act in ways consistent with those hopes, desires, and dreams. And when they see people behaving in harmful ways, they warn them by picturing the future to which that harmful behavior will lead. (64)*

*Our Lord God is good, good in all things.*

*You've heard my proclamation, because Luke recorded it. I was not written of again, but know that I was out there, preaching away. The Holy Spirit caused me to reassure the people that:*

*Through the heartfelt mercies of our God,  
God's Sunrise will break in upon us,  
Shining on those in the darkness,  
those sitting in the shadow of death,*

Then showing us the way, one foot at a time,  
down the path of peace.

*Our Lord God is good, good in all things.*

*When it was time for me to pass the mantle to my son, John the Baptist, he took it up and continued my tradition. He rallied the people back to God.*

*He reminded them what the prophet Isaiah before him proclaimed, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight..." He told the people, "I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire!"*

*This is my story. This is my proclamation. This is my experience of prayer, of lifetime prayer. It is not enough to wish for the things we want to see in our lives or in the world. We must lean into them. We must let our hopes, our dreams, and our desires move our hearts, our hands, and our feet. And in our prayers, we will discern God's will for our lives more clearly if we stop asking for what WE want and ask instead what God wants of US. I thought I wanted a child, but God needed a prophet to herald the way for the Messiah. I thought God had forgotten me, but God had plans for me that were not yet made know to me until it was time—GOD's time.*

*Our Lord God is good, good in all things. Let us remember this.*

*May It Be So.*