

Luke 1:68-79

‘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,
to grant us 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.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.’

Beyond a Political Peace

Sermonic thesis: God sent Christ to bring us a peace beyond our expectations.

1. Our passage today ends with the word “peace.” Peace is one of those things we all desire, but we often get “peace” confused with “security” by thinking that peace is a condition that we live under when there is no war and no threats to our liberty. Our nation was founded upon principles of human dignity and the rights of all people to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Our nation spends an incredible amount of money on our military – the men and women who too often have to spend Christmas away from home in order to defend our nation. Our cities and municipalities also spend a lot of money on our police force and our first responders who often have to work on Christmas so that people like me can have a nice “peaceful” Christmas with family and friends knowing that if something does happen that disturbs our peace – like a crime or a fire or a medical emergency – someone will immediately respond to our need. But the peace that I’ve just described can just as well be called safety – our military, our police, our fire department and our medical teams are all present to help us feel safe. We also associate peace with our economic conditions. We feel at peace knowing that we can buy food and pay the mortgage or the rent, that we have enough money to take care of ourselves and our families. We buy insurance policies – health, life, car and property -to give us “peace of mind” knowing that if a disaster occurs our standard of living, or our family’s standard of living, won’t be compromised. So if we add all these things together we believe that we may have a perfect peace, right? If our nation protects human rights and it’s strong and

secure, and we live in a safe neighborhood with a vigilant police force and a fire department that's second-to-none and the best EMTs and hospitals, and we make a decent salary, we feel at peace, right?

2. This is the kind of peace that Zechariah begins describing in the song that he sings to us this morning: he speaks of nation saved from foreign enemies, and if the people followed the law that was given by God to Moses they would live in safe communities and prosper. The law of Moses instructs them to tend to the needs of one another in the community so there shouldn't be any threat of starvation or homelessness. Zechariah understands that the messiah is going to establish these conditions, and everyone will live "in peace."
3. But is there something beyond this peace? I certainly hope so; despite the fact that we live in one of the freest, wealthiest, and strongest nations on the planet there are an incredible number of people who have not found happiness. On average 129 people commit suicide each day. Over 100 people in this country die of a drug overdose each day. That's less than half as many as those who are murdered each day. All these statistics tell me that being free and being rich and being safe does not give us true peace. We are still driven to hurt ourselves and to kill ourselves as we kill others. Those aren't indicators of "peace of mind."
4. Let me tell you, I grew up in a pretty well-off family. My father made a decent salary, our family lived in a nice home. They could even afford to send me to a college prep school. We ate steak at least once a week. I was a white male, which meant that I had the least to complain about with regard to human rights in this country. In my childhood and youth and young adulthood our country was never under any threat of foreign attack. By every measure I had a secure existence, but I did not have peace.
5. True peace is what Zechariah hints at in today's reading. It's a peace that, according to the apostle Paul, "transcends all understanding." That's why it's so hard for us to imagine and why our best hope seems to be personal freedom and security. That's why the Jewish people in Jesus' day were expecting a "political" messiah who would free them from foreign domination, as if that would be enough to bring them peace. It's the same misconception that we might have in thinking that securing our borders, living in safe neighborhoods and having a steady job will secure our peace. **It won't, because all of those factors have to do with things that occur outside of us; none of those conditions have any effect on what goes on within us.** All the personal liberty and security and wealth will not cause you to get along with your neighbor or your family or the person sitting in the next pew. They have no impact at all on your soul. But Jesus comes to offer us a peace that is more than superficial; it's a peace that penetrates our soul.
6. Because a superficial peace is a passive peace that has to do with changing our outer circumstances – our wealth, our rights, and our security – that all depends on others. True peace comes from our own actions – our own decisions. Zechariah indicates this in the last phrase of today's reading:

“...the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

That’s right; peace is not something that comes from factors outside of us; it requires some movement on our part. We have to walk in a way that leads to peace.

And John the Baptist is the one who’s telling us how to walk. This song that Zechariah is singing is as much about John as it is about Jesus:

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.

John is the one who “prepares the way” of Jesus by getting people to examine themselves and change their hearts; the emphasis of John’s message was REPENTANCE. People need to examine their own hearts, realize that they are treading on the wrong path, and change direction. John the Baptist is not usually depicted as a happy-go-lucky kind of guy with kind words for folks; he was a firebrand with strong words that convicted people to examine their hearts and prepare them for Jesus Christ, to walk in ways that led them to peace. We need to give up the false belief that having a strong nation with secure borders and a top notch police force is going to give us the peace that our soul desires, and we need to focus our attention on our own souls, making the changes within us that prepare us for Jesus Christ. Then and only then can we live in the joy of the Lord, knowing that whatever troubles may come our way – whether they be foreign invaders or Uncle Bert’s bad habit of belching at the dinner table – we can handle it with a heart that remains at peace with ourselves and with God. We may not be able to change Uncle Bert’s bad habits, even though we may speak to Uncle Bert in a loving way and tell him that his habits are offensive to some, but we don’t have to let those habits take away our peace. Our neighbors may not curb their dog, and we may kindly ask them to start doing so and be met by curses and threats, but we don’t have to respond in sort with curses and threats of our own; we can maintain our peace.

Advent is a season when we prepare ourselves for Christ’s coming. It’s more involved than setting up the Advent Wreath, the Christmas tree, and the Nativity Scene, because when Christ really comes he’s not going to be concerned about whether our ornaments are up but whether our hearts are prepared. Christ’s coming implies judgment, so we must ask ourselves, “Am I ready for that judgment?” And before you get the wrong idea, I believe in a God who desires ALL people to join him in his kingdom – I believe Jesus welcomes everyone. But are you ready to enter his kingdom? Is your heart prepared to accept Jesus as readily as readily as Jesus will accept you? Are you going to be like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son who stands outside the father’s house because someone you don’t like is inside celebrating? May God grant us the courage to hear the call of the Baptist, to repent and submit to God that he may “guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The peace of God,
which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds
in the knowledge and love of God
and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord;
and the + blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always