Zechariah’s Discovery

Second in the 2017 series “Christmas Discoveries.”

# Scripture: Luke 1:67-80

# Key thought: Zechariah would have a son, John, who would announce the arrival of God’s promised salvation.

# Intro:

Last month, President Trump made an official state visit to China. While reporters debate the outcomes of the trip, there is no doubt that it was an important moment in US - China relations. “State visits are …the highest expression of friendly bilateral relationships between two sovereign states” (Wikipedia). So it is no wonder that the President is accompanied by a bevy of reporters on such trips. Everyone wants to know what is happening. A few sentences in a leader’s speech or even a departure from protocol in the reception of the guest by a host country could be an important signal.

In the passage that we are dealing with today, Zechariah is anticipating a visitation of Israel by someone even more important that a head of state. But, Zechariah could not have understood it at all if he had not experienced a taste of such a visit himself.

# Zechariah’s personal visitation from God

## God visited Zechariah in the temple

The background of the message of Zechariah is his own personal life journey over the previous year or so.  The story is related earlier in the same chapter of Luke. Zechariah was a Jewish priest and was chosen for his turn to burn incense at the proper time in the Temple at Jerusalem. The people of God, the Israelites, were praying in the outer court of the Temple. The Bible tells us that suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah and announced to him that even though he and Elizabeth were both along in years, and were childless, they would soon have a son. They were to name him “John.” The mission for this boy of which the angel spoke was amazing.

He will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Luke 1:15-17 NIV

 Zechariah had very human questions and was filled with doubt. His words of reply to the angel showed this.

Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” Luke 1:18 NIV

The angel replied that because Zechariah had not believed the word from the Lord even though it was brought by an angel, Zechariah would be unable to speak until the time that the prediction would come true. The Bible records that Zechariah returned to his home from his priestly duties and as the angel had predicted his wife Elizabeth became pregnant. But also as the angel predicted, Zechariah was unable to speak from the very moment in the temple when the angel pronounced his sentence, and he had to communicate by signs and written communication.

## Zechariah’s silence broken

So for all the months of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, Zechariah could not speak. During that time he could reflect on the visitation that he had experienced and on what the angel had told him. God had visited Zechariah in a very personal way with an announcement. Then, as promised, God had visited Elizabeth and Zachariah with a miracle, the conception of a child when they were past the years of childbearing. Now Zechariah became completely convinced that this personal visitation to him and his wife was only the beginning, the first step, and the initial sign in a much more massive and amazing visitation from God that the nation Israel was about to experience. God was coming to his people in a new way through the soon-coming Messiah whom his son John would herald with prophetic inspiration like that of Elijah.

When John is born, Zechariah’s extended family was going to name the boy after his father. This would’ve been a natural thing for an only son of an older man. But Elizabeth objected and said that his name was to be John. The extended family thought this was strange because there was no one in the family with that name. So finally they went to Zechariah, who had apparently been left out of the conversation so far because he could not speak. And when they had made the issue clear to Zechariah, he took a writing tablet and wrote clearly, “His name is John.”

At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again. His tongue was loosed not simply so he could make sounds again, but immediately for the wonderful prophetic word that we have here in our text this morning which is commonly known as the Benedictus. The term “Benedictus” comes from the first word of the Latin translation which was used in the Catholic Church for a thousand years. In our NRSV the corresponding word is “blessed.”

## Conscious of God at work

The point for us is this. Zechariah and much of Israel had been going through the religious motions of their faith. But many of them were not very conscious that God was at work. The idea of a personal visit from God was far from their consciousness. God had not spoken with prophetic voice in Israel in 400 years. The last prophet, Malachi, writer of the last Old Testament book, had lived 400 years before Zechariah. That’s a long time for God to seem silent. But God had not forgotten his people. He had not forgotten his covenant with Israel. When the time was ready, God was ready to visit his people. Because Zechariah had been visited by God, his own faith was renewed and he became very conscious that God was ready to visit his people in a new and awesome way.

## Our need for a visit from God

This last week we want to hear Bishop Bickerton. Our bishop shared with us that the Methodist Church has suffered a period of terrible decline over the last 10 years in the United States. We are down about 25% in membership, about 25% in attendance, and even worse; we are down about 50% in reported baptisms and confirmations. Our bishop has been observing the district for about 14 months, and he reported sadly that he was afraid that in many places our church has settled for a spiritual mediocrity. It is in dire need of revival. And “revival” was exactly his word for what we need. We need a renewal by the Holy Spirit, and a new call for “spiritual excellence.” We need to come to believe again as Zachariah came to believe that God visits his people with salvation, that God visits his people with his inspirational presence, that God visits his people with personal conviction, that God visits his people with spiritual renewal.

Think about our country today. Though we may have some political enemies of our country; some sinister organizations working to undermine our democracy, these are not the main malady from which we as people need to be rescued. The central and most pressing crisis from which we need salvation is our sinfulness. We need to be rescued from our greed. We need to be liberated from our addiction to self-centered comfort, pleasure and entertainment. We need to be redeemed from our lustful and non-covenantal approach to God’s gift of sexuality. We need to be saved from our pride. We need to be delivered from the enemy of our souls, rescued from his clutches, and turned safely into the fold which is the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Zechariah saw the same need in Israel of his day and he rejoiced that God was sending Zechariah’s son, John, to start the ball rolling for God; to preach repentance; to call people back to God.

# God comes to His people

## The certainty of God’s visitation

The idea of God graciously “visiting” or “coming” to his people appears twice in the prophetic Benedictus. The first time is in verse 68.

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.” Luke 1:68-69 NIV

One of the first things we observed about this verse is that the English construction sounds like this has already happened. But we know from the context that Zechariah is referring to what is going to happen through the one who is to come after his son, John, the one his son is to announce, Jesus Christ. But prophetic utterances were frequently phrased as if they had already happened. The reason for this is that they are certain. They are so certain that it is as if they have already happened. In the mind of God they have been decided and set in motion. They are “as good as done” to use an English idiom from today.

## The favor of God’s visitation

I also note in Zechariah’s message the emphasis upon the favor of God that brings this visitation from heaven to us both in the message of John and the in the person of Jesus.

God is showing “mercy” to Israel (1:72). All of the blessings coming to us are due to the “tender mercy of our God” (1:78). Along with this the root idea of gifts given to the people of God occurs twice in the passage as well (1:73 NRSV and 1:79 NRSV).

This is the continued echo of the truth that the day of the Messiah would be a day of unusual divine favor. The original prophetic statement of this idea may well be that of Isaiah (49:8). But the Apostle Paul incorporates Isaiah’s words and explains it well.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As God’s co-workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain. For he says,

“In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.”

I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor; now is the day of salvation.
2 Cor 5:21-6:2

## God’s coming to us

God is still visiting his people. One man I know whose name was Tom heard God speak to him during a service. Mary Catherine felt an identifiable sense of warm peace. Mike saw a vision of Jesus in the church aisle beckoning him to follow. Dick R. saw vision of a cross. A person at Bible study testified that she sensed that God was working to help her curb swearing. Others had no unusual sensations or sights to report, just a positive sense that they are a child of God and desire to follow Jesus.

God works in various ways. But he still visits his people.

# God gives His people the knowledge of salvation

## The champion of our salvation

The second observation I make is the use of the word “horn.” This is an idiom from the Old Testament that is apparently so difficult to explain that translators have almost universally shied away from paraphrasing it and they continue to use the literal translation which is word “horn” as in a bull’s horn or a ram’s horn. So we need to explain what this is.

Those of you who have been raised on a farm or near a farm will understand the idiom. If you’ve ever been around cattle in the pasture, you know that they are constantly vying for dominance. This is true not just of cattle, is true of chickens, sheep and goats and other animals. If you watch National Geographic Safari videos, you can see this happening among impalas or lions too. But, I think the idiom is best understood by thinking of cows or bulls vying for dominance in the days before humans dehorned cattle. What happens when one cow or bull wins the fight for dominance is this. The loser slinks away always with their head down. But the winner raises their head high, with their horns high in the air, proudly announcing by their posture that they are the dominant animal. This fight for dominance goes through the flock until one animal is the dominant animal in the whole herd or flock. They are the leader. If a predator comes against the herd or flock, the dominant animals would be also the first defenders. That goes along with being the leader of the flock.

Now consider this Old Testament text that uses this metaphor.

“He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed.”
1 Sam 2:10

Using the analogy that we have just discussed, it is obvious that what God is promising to do is make the king the Victor. (See Psalm 89:17 for a similar promise to all who those who fear God.) Now this passage is from the prayer of Hannah so it is not unrelated to the passage in Luke for the prayer of Mary that preceded Zechariah song is very parallel to the prayer of Hannah.

Now consider these Old Testament words from the 18th Psalm.

The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I have been saved from my enemies.
Ps 18:2-3 NIV

What could David mean by the phrase “horn of my salvation?” Well if you are a small calf in the herd of cattle and the dominant bull with his big horns and huge neck fights off a bear, then his horns have been your salvation, haven’t they? So the psalmist is saying that God is the dominant one who has been the leader, the champion, to use a modern word, of his salvation from his enemies. David was always very conscious that he did not win his battles by his own sword but because of the Lord’s favor.

So now we can come to the New Testament and ask what does the prophecy mean when Zechariah says under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit?

He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. Luke 1:69 NIV

The answer is simple. It means that God is raising up a leader of deliverance, a champion of redemption, one who will be victorious in bringing salvation to the people of God. That is what Zechariah saw coming by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And that is what Jesus became.

Peter, preaching in the early days of the church as recorded in the book of Acts, put it very strongly.

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:12 NIV

But the apostle to the Hebrews explains even more powerfully in two different places.

How can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him,
Heb 2:3-4 NRSV

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, Heb 5:8-10 NRSV

## What is this salvation about?

### Note of national rescue

One can sense Zechariah’s desire for the nation to be rescued from Rome in the Benedictus though he does not mention Rome by name. But for Zechariah that level of meaning is almost immediately transcended.

### Serving God in holiness

Zechariah proceeds quickly to a much bigger vision of what God’s salvation would mean. He foresaw that God’s goal looked way beyond nationalistic ends for Israel to something much grander and broader. The NRSV makes this higher vision clearer, I think, by putting the part about rescue from national enemies in a subordinate clause.

…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. Luke 1:73-75 NRSV

As a priest Zechariah sees the vision of God’s people in right standing before God and serving God with right living and wholesome living.

### Forgiveness of sins

But in order for even this to be possible, God would need to deal with a serious impediment to our service to God, our sins. Zechariah’s Benedictus points out that the Messiah’s coming would do just that. The salvation that God was sending via His anointed and appointed Messiah, Jesus Christ, would offer us something that the OT sacrifices of which Zechariah as a priest was often a part, looked toward but could never quite achieve, real forgiveness of sins. And this proclamation of repentance and forgiveness was to begin with John the Baptist.

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. Luke 1:76-77 NRSV

So when John came into his ministry, he preached repentance. When Jesus began his ministry, he preached repentance as well.

### Peace

One more benefit of God coming to his people is promised in the Benedictus of Zechariah. It is peace.

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." Luke 1:78-79 NRSV

How amazing is this prediction. I cannot help but think about how the angels sang on the first Christmas night,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” Luke 2:14

I cannot help but think about the promise of Jesus to all of us as his followers,

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. John 14:27 NIV

Paul explains the wonderful gift that comes to us with salvation in Jesus this way.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, Rom 5:1 NIV

The question for us is this. Are we experiencing this gift of salvation that Jesus came to bring to us? Christmas is a reminder that Jesus came to give us peace with God.

# Concluding Question

There is a really sad note in the Gospel of Luke near the end. As Jesus was going to Calvary, he commented upon the response of the people of Israel to the visitation that God had graciously granted to them, the visitation that Zechariah had predicted.

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.” Luke 19:41-44 NIV

This saying of Jesus introduces us to the frightening possibility that we can be blinded by our own desires and stubborn will to the visitation from God’s Spirit. Like a child who closes his ears, so to speak, to his parent’s words, we don’t hear God’s advice or invitations. We can also miss the day of our visitation. We must heed the warning. Whenever we sense God speaking to us, it is a precious opportunity and we need to respond as best we know how.

Christmas is a reminder of the message that God comes to visit his people. He speaks to us through ministers; through reading the Bible, through the voice of conscience, through Christian music, and in many other ways as well. This Christmas is a reminder that God wants you and I to discover again as Zechariah did that God has visited us for salvation at Christmas and through Christ’s Spirit he is still visiting us today.

Have you opened your heart to receive the salvation that God has sent?