

April 17, 2022

THE BIRTH OF JOHN AND THE BLESSINGS OF CHRIST'S RESURRECTION

Luke 1:57-80

(4 of 13 in a series through Luke 1-7)

On this Easter Sunday—and, really, every Sunday—we remember the resurrection. I hope it would be easy for any visitor to see on any given Sunday that we love the fact that Jesus walked out of the tomb alive. But why? What are the blessings that come from Christ's resurrection? Well, in some ways, that's not hard to answer, is it? We can just think of what takes place in the gospels and acts after Jesus is raised. After Peter had denied Jesus at his crucifixion, it's the resurrected Christ who comes to him and restores him, reminding us that because of the resurrection sinners like me, you, and Peter can know mercy and forgiveness. Or we can think of that same man—Peter—preaching boldly on the day of Pentecost to see that the resurrection means that redeemed sinners can be used powerfully by God. Or we might think of these transformed followers of Christ, now indwelt by the Spirit, being faithful even to death to see that the resurrection means they have been empowered to obey their Lord. Or, we might even think of Paul preaching in Acts 13:32-33, saying, "And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus," reminding ourselves that the resurrection sends a message loud and clear that God is always faithful to his promises.

But I want to argue this morning that all these glorious truths—these blessings that flow from Christ's resurrection—weren't unforeseen, but were actually prophesied decades earlier in the hill country, in a town of Judah when an old and formerly barren woman gave birth to her son and a priest named Zechariah, who'd been under the discipline of the Lord, was filled with the Spirit and began to prophesy.

In Luke 1:57-80 we read the story of the birth of John the Baptist, but more than that, we hear and see the Spirit telling us what the work of Jesus Christ—his life, death, and resurrection—meant for his people. And so as we look at the events and the prophetic words of this story this morning, I think we will be able to see from this text the blessings that flow to us from Christ's resurrection.

The scene itself begins with great confusion. The day has come for Elizabeth to give birth, and so this miracle baby is born. But they do not name the child yet. That will happen when they take their child on the eighth day to have him circumcised. And relatives and neighbors had heard about this glorious story of a child being born to this barren woman and elderly couple, so they come to rejoice and celebrate with them. But it's here that the confusion begins. You'll remember that Zechariah is unable to speak since the time he didn't believe Gabriel's promise about Elizabeth bearing a son. Well, apparently he was suffering from more than just that, which we'll see.

The confusion revolves around the naming of Zechariah and Elizabeth's son. Apparently as the couple is standing there with their child, the neighbors and relatives are looking at him and talking about how cute he is and all the stuff that we say about newborn babies. But as they're doing so, they're saying things like, "Look at little Zechariah" or "Hey, little Zeke" and the like. But Elizabeth was telling them, "No, we're not naming him after his father. We're naming him John."

Okay, now here's the element we don't really know of till this moment. Apparently when Zechariah was disciplined by not being able to speak, he was also made so that he could not hear. So apparently while all this conversation about the baby's name is going on, those around Elizabeth are tempted to think, "Poor Zechariah doesn't even know what she's doing right now" because he can't hear the conversation. So they start signaling to him with their hands (which is our clue that he can't hear—otherwise just talk to him!) somehow to communicate to Zechariah that his wife is pulling a fast one on him and not naming their son Zechariah, Jr. or some other family name. And eventually he understands what they're saying, gets a tablet to write on, and confirms what Elizabeth had been saying by writing, "His name is John."

And Luke tells us, "Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God" (v. 64). And this created all kinds of wonder and fear among all around as they wondered, "What then will this child be?" (v. 66). After all, the circumstances around John's birth were clearly miraculous.

But the moment in this story I want to focus most of our attention on for the sermon is what happened next. Luke tells us that after the Lord gave back to Zechariah the ability to speak, he "was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied" (v. 67). And what he said is found in verses 68-79. And it's what Zechariah does and what he says that reveals to us the blessings that come with our salvation. Or, we might say (because salvation is tied to Christ's work for us), what truths can we hold to in light of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Let me name a few.

God is faithful to his promises

As Zechariah starts prophesying, what's interesting is that he's not first and foremost focused on his son, John. He'll focus on John in verses 76-79, but not at the beginning. He understands that John is a forerunner for the Lord, and so he's prophesying about the Lord to come—the Messiah. And he begins, saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old" (vv. 68-70).

If you remember what we looked at early in Luke 1 about Gabriel telling Mary that Jesus is coming as the son of David, which is the Messiah, then you'll see that this is what Zechariah is affirming. He's noting that if his son is a predecessor for the Lord, then God is bringing his promised Messiah from the house of David. He calls him "a horn of salvation" because horn was an image of power and strength that is specifically applied to the Messiah in Scripture (see Psalm 89:17-24; 132:17; 148:14). In other words, Zechariah's prophecy is a praise to the Lord for the

fact that John's birth means that God is sending the Christ into the world to save his people. And he's doing it specifically, "as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old" (v. 70). Thus, Zechariah is simply affirming that God is doing what he promised he would do. That is to say, God is faithful to his promises.

Now, I realize that you could hear this point and yawn. I didn't type this point in my sermon thinking, "Man, I know when I say this people are going to start saying to themselves, 'I never realized that or even heard it before'"—especially since I made this point in one of my last couple of sermons. But I do think we may well underestimate the power of this truth and its effect in our lives. So let me say it this way: our obedience as believers is built upon our belief that God keeps his promises.

Think of what the Scripture tells us in Hebrews 11. Noah obeyed God and built the ark because he believed that what God had promised about his coming judgment was true. Abraham obeyed and went where God told him to go because he believed that this heavenly city that God promised him was real. Why was Moses able to refuse to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter and instead choose to be mistreated with the people of God? The Scripture tells us it was because he was looking to the reward. In other words, he believed in what God had promised. That's why the author of Hebrews constantly pictures their obedience as something done "by faith." And it's true for us. It's only because we believe the promises of God to bless our obedience that we choose not to practice sexual immorality with the person we're dating or view pornography. We choose to bless our enemies and pray for them because we believe that God is faithful to his promises and will not be mocked. We give, believing that God will bless us in his kingdom. Every act of obedience is built upon a recognition—whether conscious or not—that God is faithful to his promises. And so one thing that we can do to strengthen our obedience is to become more acquainted with God's Word and specific promises that we can hold to when we are tempted to disobey so that we might be strengthened for obedience. God is faithful to his promises. We also see that God gives mercy and forgiveness to his children.

God gives mercy and forgiveness to his children

As Zechariah continues his prophecy he notes that the Lord raised up a horn of salvation for us (i.e. the Messiah) "that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant" (vv. 71-72). Moreover, as he ends his prophecy focusing on his newborn son, he notes that John's task will be "to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of God" (vv. 77-78).

Now, we delved into the issue of salvation involving the judgment of our enemies when we looked at Mary's magnificat a couple of weeks ago, so I won't focus on that again. But I do want to note that twice Zechariah's prophecy declares that God brings about his salvation through the work of his Son and he speaks of it in terms of God showing mercy and then forgiving us of our sins through his tender mercy.

One of the reasons God sent his Son into the world to live, die, and be raised from the dead is because he wanted to show mercy to his people and forgive us of our sins. Now, as clear as the text says that, I think that you and I can still struggle to believe it, don't we? It's so much easier for some of us to picture the Lord being displeased with us, fed up with us, and wanting nothing to do with us than of him delighting in showing us mercy and extending to us forgiveness. And this leads us to never walking in the joy of knowing that we are free from condemnation. It's as if we feel more comfortable thinking there's still some atonement left for us to make before we can be really forgiven. And there's a reason we think that way. As a mouthpiece of the Lord, Isaiah says in Isaiah 55:7, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." Now, catch that. The Lord is telling us to forsake our ways and thoughts where they are evil and turn to the Lord *so that* God might have compassion on us and abundantly pardon our sins. In other words, as God tells us to turn from our sins, it's because he's eager to demonstrate his compassion and abundantly pardon us. And Isaiah continues, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is 55:8-9).

Do you see? The Lord is saying that because our thoughts aren't naturally as glorious as God's thoughts and our ways aren't as beautiful and perfect as his ways, we have trouble believing that he's eager to show compassion and abundantly pardon our sins. And the reason why we struggle to see that is because in our lowly thoughts that's not how we are. When sinned against, we don't naturally think, "Oh man, I can't wait for that person to repent because I can't wait to show them mercy and let them know I've abundantly forgiven them." That's not how we naturally think, but those are God's thoughts. But we must believe it and walk in the blessing that this truth is for us.

As Zechariah prophesies, God sent his Son into the world "to show the mercy promised to our father" and for the "forgiveness of their sins, because of . . . [his] tender mercy." This is what the resurrection means for us. We orient our lives around gathering with God's people and praising his name on the first day of the week because we remember that this was the day Jesus walked out of the tomb alive, and there is nothing more precious to us in all the world to us because that event means that we get to be the objects of God's mercy and forgiveness. That's the second thing Zechariah reminds us of. Third, we see that God uses sinful men powerfully.

God uses redeemed sinners powerfully

Zechariah's prophecy is kind of amazing, isn't it? I mentioned at the start that realities that aren't even confirmed until Pentecost are already being foretold here. As we've already noted, he is declaring that God is bringing his Messiah into the world to save his people from their enemies to show mercy and forgiveness to them—all realities that were promised in the New Covenant. But one of the most amazing things is that Zechariah is being used in this way at all.

As we see in our text, the text begins with Zechariah mute and deaf. That's why everything was so confusing when they go to name John. He can't speak and he can't hear what any around him are saying. But why was this the case with him? Well, it wasn't too long ago that we looked at Luke 1:1-25, so I'm sure you remember.

When Zechariah had gone into the temple and the angel Gabriel appeared to him in such glory that Zechariah was afraid of his appearance, Gabriel declared to him that his old and barren wife would bear a son who would be a forerunner to the Messiah and Zechariah's response was, "How can I know this is really going to happen?"

Now, that's a weird response when a glorious angel appears to you in the temple, and tells you that the miracle you've been praying for is going to happen. And, of course, Gabriel answers the way you would answer if you're an angel sent from God with a message and the recipient of that message is asking, "Yeah, but how can I know this will happen?" He tells Zechariah, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was set to speak to you and to bring you this good news" (1:20). In other words, Gabriel seemed to say, "Really? You're not going to believe me, an angel sent from God?" But it was at that moment that Zechariah suffered a disciplinary act from God. He was unable to speak (and seemingly unable to hear as well).

So, that's why he's mute and deaf when our text begins focusing on the naming of his son. He's demonstrated unbelief. He's suffered discipline at the hand of God. And then God removes the discipline. The second Zechariah writes on that tablet, "His name is John," he is able to hear and speak. And so what does the Lord do with him? Does he say, "Good, Zechariah, it seems you learned your lesson, but you're really not in a place where I can use you for a while because, well, look what you did?" No. He uses him to prophesy things that we won't see played out until the resurrection of Christ, Pentecost, and in the resurrection to come. He's used powerfully.

And this is how God works. When Jesus walked out of that tomb alive, having paid for our sins on the cross, it became clear that God was going to use sinners like you and me in powerful ways. As I started, we see it with Peter on the day of Pentecost. The one who denied Jesus is preaching powerfully. But that's not the first time we see it in Luke's writings. We see it right here with Zechariah. The one who wouldn't believe is prophesying truths that we're delighting in 2,000 years later. And this is true for us as well. There are no second class citizens among God's children. If you're convinced that the Lord can't work powerfully in your life because of some sin in your past, then you're simply believing a lie of the devil. And today is the day to walk away from that lie. God uses redeemed sinners powerfully. And, finally, God enables us to live holy lives by his Spirit.

God enables us to live holy lives by his Spirit

As Zechariah prophesies about God showing mercy, remembering the covenant that he swore to Abraham, he adds, "That we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days" (vv. 74-75). When God shows us mercy and forgiveness, he does it so that we might serve him in righteousness and

holiness. And if we ask how, the key is in the one person that is perhaps too easily overlooked in this story but who keeps showing up—the Holy Spirit.

It's interesting how frequently Luke notes the work of the Spirit. When Zechariah is told that he'll have a son named John, Gabriel told him, "And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (1:15). When Mary asked how she as a virgin might bear a son, Gabriel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (1:35). When Mary went to visit Elizabeth, we are told before Elizabeth prophesied, "And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (1:41). And here, we are told, "And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied" (1:67).

This is the answer to how Zechariah's prophecy will be fulfilled. How are we enabled as believers to serve the Lord in holiness and righteousness all our days? We are enabled because the Spirit who would come upon saints before the finished work of Christ and empower them to do great things now indwells us. The risen Christ poured out the Spirit on his people so that we might have the desires and ability to obey him from our hearts. Again, we see it after Jesus' resurrection at Pentecost, but we also see it prophesied right here by Zechariah. Zechariah was foretelling of the blessing of the Holy Spirit in believers' lives—a blessing that flows to us because of Christ's resurrection. We are delivered from our enemies to serve the Lord in holiness.

Brothers and sisters, do not believe the lie that you cannot walk in holiness. You may feel like you can't walk away from that sin that seemingly has you in its clutches, but you have died to sin. The devil may make his accusations, but they are baseless. If he tells you that you deserve to die, you can say, "I know, but Christ died in my place." And he has given you the Holy Spirit to empower you to walk in newness of life.

After Jesus' resurrection, we encounter all kinds of blessings. God shows his faithfulness to his word by bringing mercy and forgiveness of sins, powerfully using redeemed sinners, and enabling his once weak and cowardly people to obey him. But we don't hear of these first after the resurrection. We see them right here in and from Zechariah. May we then find ourselves thankful to God for his redeeming work and eager to walk in faithful obedience to the one who has shown us mercy. And let us demonstrate that thankfulness now as we come to the table. Amen.