

Second Sunday of Christmas
January 4, 2004
Luke 1:68-75

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Christmas in Review

1. God has redeemed us
2. God has kept his promises
3. God has enabled us to serve him

*^{NIV} **Luke 1:68** "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us--⁷² to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant,⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham:⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

Dear Christian Friends,

Christmas 2003 is getting to be just a tiny dot in your rearview mirror by this time. In many of your homes, the Christmas tree is down, the Christmas decorations are packed away for another year, and your focus has shifted to what's coming next. For many of you, tomorrow is the day when you get back into the non-holiday routine. But according to our church calendar, we're still celebrating Christmas. Today is the 2nd Sunday after Christmas, a time to savor for a little while longer the grace of God that sent us a Savior.

The man who's going to lead us in this review, however, is not someone who is fresh from seeing the newborn Christ Child, but someone who when he spoke these words was still anticipating the coming of Christ. He is Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. When Zechariah said what's reported here in Luke 1, he had just gotten his voice back after spending nine months as a mute because he had not believed what the angel had told him about having a son in his old age. But now, with his newly regained power of speech, it's apparent that Zechariah does believe. What he says here in this well-known song called the *Benedictus* is both a lively expression of his faith and an excellent review of the blessings of Christmas. The point Zechariah makes first is that the coming of Christ means that God has redeemed us.

1. God has redeemed us

The introduction to Zechariah's song says, "(John's) father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: 'Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.'" To redeem someone is to

pay that ransom that sets them free. It points to our previous condition as one of captivity. Along the way, Zechariah also uses words that picture salvation and rescue. *“He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.”* The horn, because horned animals use their horns to attack and defend, was a picture of courage and strength. Jesus is that “horn of salvation.” Zechariah also says, *“(God has) rescue(d) us from the hand of our enemies.”* Zechariah’s faith moves him to view the birth of Jesus not just as the ho-hum birth of another child, but as a significant, world-changing, life-saving event for him and for everyone who shares his faith in this Child.

Did you see on TV or in the newspaper articles about the first child born in the New Year in Modesto or Sacramento? It was predictable that there would be such stories, but did it thrill you to your core to hear these stories? Did you even say something like, “Honey, take a look at this! It says this baby was born just ten seconds after midnight on New Year’s Day!” Probably not. You likely didn’t know the parents and the birth of that child had no special relevance to you or to your welfare. But that’s not the case with Jesus. His birth means redemption, salvation, and rescue for us. By sending his Son into our world, God did away with our captivity and our condemnation and snatched us from the imminent danger of eternal destruction.

Bear in mind that the Jews had been waiting a long time for this to happen. Many of them were wondering if God still remembered his promises. It had been four centuries since God had sent a prophet. The time since the last prophet, Malachi, was a time of unbroken silence on God’s part. Like an elderly grandmother in a nursing home, the Jews were wondering if they’d been forgotten. “Why doesn’t God visit? Why doesn’t he come and do something or say something?” But now God breaks that silence. Through his angel, he speaks. And his message for Zechariah is that his son, John, will be a prophet to rival the greatest prophets and the forerunner of the Messiah himself. God is going to do something. He’s going to redeem his people.

I don’t know whether Zechariah just then understood redemption like we New Testament believers understand redemption. In the words of our catechism we confess, “(I believe that Jesus Christ) has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood, and with his innocent suffering and death.” Jews many times tended to have a different concept of redemption. Remember how the Emmaus disciples on Easter evening expressed their regret about the death of Jesus? **“We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.”** (Luke 24:21) Their first take on the crucifixion of Jesus was that it was a dashing of hopes, not an act of redemption. But crucifixion was precisely how it had to happen. Through the death of Christ, God redeemed us. He rescued us and made us his own. That’s how precious you are to God. Even the death of his own Son was not too big a price for him to pay to set you free from sin and death.

The coming of Jesus, as we've seen through Advent and Christmas, was in accordance with what God had promised ever since the Fall into sin. Through his prophets—men like Moses, David, Isaiah and Micah—God had promised to send a Savior. The birth of the Christ Child in Bethlehem makes it clear: God has kept his promises.

2. God has kept his promises

I heard someone say the other day that he thinks we run the risk of losing 40 points on our IQ just waiting in line at the supermarket check-out stand. He was referring to the tabloid newspapers that are for sale there. This is the time of year, of course, when those tabloids feature predictions for the coming year. While it might be amusing, to read these prognostications, we have no delusions about their reliability. They aren't to be trusted. But with the gift of hindsight, we can now see that whenever God gave his people a promise about the coming of the Messiah, that promise was kept. Zechariah observes that everything was going to happen just "*as he said through his holy prophets of long ago.*" No stretching, spinning, or reinterpretation was needed. The promises were fulfilled just as the Holy Spirit had led the prophets to write them down.

The prophecies were both numerous and specific. The Offspring of the woman to crush the serpent's head. From the tribe of Judah. From the house and line of David. Born of a virgin. Born in Bethlehem. All these and more came true exactly as prophesied when Jesus was born. It was this record of reliability that enabled the apostle Paul to write in one place, "**For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.**" (2 Cor. 1:20)

This is a matter of no small importance to us because we're still holding some of the promises of God. In our times of grief he's told us that the day is coming when he's going to gather all believers together in heaven. In our fears about the future, he's told us that he will never leave us or forsake us. As we confront adversities, he's promised that he's making all things work for our good. As we contemplate what comes after this life, Jesus has told us that his Father's house has many rooms, that he's gone to prepare a place for us, and that he's coming back to take us to be with him so that we can be where he is. Should we trust what our Lord has told us? God's faithfulness at Christmas time provides the answer. God kept every promise he made with regard to the coming of the Savior. God will surely keep his other promises as well.

Typically when we talk about being redeemed, we speak of having been redeemed *from* something. We've been redeemed from sin, from death, from hell. Recall the words of the catechism: "...purchased and won me *from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil.*" But the Bible also says that God redeemed us *for* a purpose. Zechariah says it here: "*...to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*" Maybe this is the verse Martin Luther had in mind when he continued his explanation of

the Second Article of the Creed by writing about the redemption, **“All this (Jesus) did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness...”** At any rate, the point is clear. We have been redeemed not just *from* our enemies, but *for* a life of serving God.

3. God has enabled us to serve him

As a priest in Israel, Zechariah knew what it was to serve God. In fact, he had been serving in the temple by burning incense in the Holy Place when the angel Gabriel appeared to him to tell him that he was going to have a son. Now there were many priests in Israel and the privilege of burning incense in the Holy Place was something priests were chosen for by lot. It was, essentially, a once in a lifetime opportunity to go into that sacrosanct room and burn the incense that symbolized the prayers of the people. So, Zechariah, well along in years, finally gets his chance to go beyond the curtain and serve God in this way and...what happens? The angel appears to him and he's not only startled, the Bible says, but gripped with fear. His reaction was like Isaiah who saw himself in a vision in the presence of Christ. He said, **“Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”** (Is. 6:5)

I think about this from time to time. How is it that I can stand up here and be what St. Paul calls “a steward of the mysteries of God”? Why, on account of my sins God has a right not to want me anywhere near his holy things. Why on earth should God entrust you with the sacred responsibility of relaying the message of grace to your children? Why wouldn't he send his holy angels to do it instead, and to tell our neighbors about the hope of eternal life while they're at it? Our best efforts are defiled by sin. Isaiah says about us as we are by nature, **“All our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”** They are an abomination to God. But here's what fills Zechariah with such joy: God by sending us a Savior to cleanse us from our sin has enabled us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness all our days. How can I be a pastor, how can you be a teacher or leader in this congregation, how can you teach the gospel to your child or share it with your neighbor? Not because of anything we bring to the task, but because God in his mercy has cleansed us of our sin and enabled us to serve him. We've been redeemed to serve God in holiness and righteousness.

Now it's not just men of a certain lineage and specific tribe who are the priests of God. We are all priests of God. The apostle Peter wrote, **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”** (1 Pet. 2:9) Our priestly work is to declare the praises of God, as Peter says here. And as priests we bring sacrifices, not animals anymore, but, the Bible says, **“the sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name.”** (Heb. 13:15) And we're intercessors, praying for our families, for our fellow Christians, for our leaders—for all people. In whatever

place we occupy in life, by sending us Jesus God has enabled us to serve him—and to do it without fear in holiness and righteousness.

Just a couple days after Christmas, I was in a local department store. I was amazed at how quickly the Christmas decorations had vanished. Valentine's Day decorations had taken over. But here in church we linger over Christmas a little longer, and with good reason. God, the Promise Keeper, has brought about our redemption by the coming of Christ. Now we're holy and righteous in his sight and we can serve him without fear. These are the real blessings of Christmas. Amen.