

Along the Path of Peace
Luke 1:57-80 (AFBC 12/4/16)

Every year as Christmas approaches, we hear a lot of “baby talk” around church. Most of it focuses on the birth of Jesus—as well it should—but it’s easy to forget that Jesus is not the only baby mentioned in the early chapters of the Gospels.

Matthew, for example, tells of how Herod’s outrage over being tricked by the wise men, and his fear of the newborn king they told him about, led to a bloody campaign against all the infant boys living in and around Bethlehem.

Not all the baby stories are happy ones, but the one I’m about to share with you is. At least, it starts out happy.

In the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel, we learn about an old priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Luke tells us that “Both of them were upright in the sight of God” (v. 6). He also lets us know that “...they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years” (v. 7).

But then God sends a messenger to Zechariah to say that he and his wife are going to have a baby boy—and that they are to name the child “John.” He says that God is up to something new and life-changing in the world, and John will play a big part in this.

Well, just like others have done, before and since this occasion, Zechariah questioned what he was being told. He made reference to his age—and even dared to mention his wife’s age—suggesting they might be a bit old to carry out God’s plan.

That’s when old Zechariah was told to hold his tongue. Actually, Gabriel told him that was being taken care of—that Zechariah would not be able to speak again until the baby was born. With that, let’s take a look at our text, Luke 1:57-80:

⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. ⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.” ⁶¹ They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.” ⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name

the child. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John."

⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him. ⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
⁷⁰ (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 ancestors
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 fear
⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."

⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

What then is this child going to be? Life doesn't change all that much. People's interests and concerns stay fairly constant over time. Most parents today, in fact, ask this very same question when first holding their newborn child: "What will he or she grow up to be?"

Just like back in Zechariah and Elizabeth's day, we have hopes and dreams for our children. These don't always work out, of course.

Sometimes “What will this child be?” morphs over time into “Please, child, be something!” But when they’re little, hopes are high! We expect great things!

Naming that newborn can also get to be interesting—right? Some of you’ve been there—a few are there right now! Expectant parents will tell you that this is one of the most frequent questions they get: “Have you got a name picked out?”

Luke tells us there was a bit of a controversy over the name picked for this baby. Elizabeth, the mother, said his name was “John.”

All the relatives and friends who had gathered for the official naming ceremony, however, said the child should be called “Zechariah,” after his father. Again, some of us have been there!

When Elizabeth refused to budge, they took their concerns to Zechariah thinking he would surely see it their way. Well, Zechariah motioned for a tablet and pen. He had to. He hadn’t been able to utter a sound since he doubted what Gabriel told him.

He wasn’t shocked speechless—although that would be understandable. Zechariah had been rendered speechless because he questioned that God would actually bless him and Elizabeth with a child. He’d given up on that dream a long time ago—no way it would happen now!

They brought the pen and tablet to Zechariah, fully expecting him to reverse Elizabeth’s decision. Instead, he wrote, “His name is JOHN.” And the Bible says, “They all marveled.”

Then they all marveled again because Zechariah, who hadn’t said a word in months began speaking. This is when the cousins and neighbors began asking, “What is this child going to be?”

It’s normal, friends, for parents and grandparents to feel this way about a newborn, but when the cousins and neighbors are saying it too—well... you figure there must be something to it! Everybody seemed to agree: this child would be someone extraordinary!

Would that every child was welcomed into the world this way—that every child received the message from his family first, and then from the whole community, “you’re wanted, you’re loved, and your

arrival fills us with joy! We're expecting great things from you!" What a wonderful start for any child!

For Zechariah and Elizabeth's boy, even his name expressed his parent's gratitude. The name "John" means "Gift of God."

At first, Zechariah had doubted God; and, because of this, he couldn't speak. Now, a somewhat older and much wiser man embraces his baby boy as a gift from God. Now that he can talk again, listen to what he says (**Luke 1:68-69**):

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David."

Now, lots of us have been proud papas—but I doubt that any of us have ever said something like this! What does Zechariah mean?

Well, he's letting everybody know that he now understands that God is up to something. He assumes it only has to do with his own people. He doesn't grasp that what God is doing here is for all people—Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free!

That was too much for Zechariah to comprehend in that moment—just as the thought of having a baby had been overwhelming; but now he's taking all this in as fast as he can. God is full of surprises—wonderful surprises—but old Zechariah lived among people who had just about forgotten how surprising God can be!

If you think about it, Zechariah was an accurate reflection of his community of faith. Doubtful, struggling with boredom and exhaustion, in desperate need really of something new! John's birth was God's sign to Zechariah and anyone else paying attention that God was doing something His world greatly needed.

Zechariah didn't understand everything, but he did get this right: God was raising up what he called a "horn of salvation." That's not a term we would use, but I think it makes sense when explained.

Some animals have "horns;" and for them, so much of their strength is transferred through that horn. You've seen pictures of the "running of the bulls" in Pamplona, Spain. When someone is gored by one of those bulls, it becomes obvious how powerful the bulls are—and how dumb some people are!

This gets at what the term “horn of salvation” means. It’s all about power! God was sending His Son into the world; and all the power of God to save His people was focused in Him. The Messiah was coming; and He would be God’s “horn of salvation” sent from heaven to save the world.

Then, as Zechariah continues, he tells us something about the future ministry of his boy, John. Listen (**v. 76-78a**):

“And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God...”

This is a touching scene. Zechariah is praising God for this child as he also speaks to his son about what he’ll eventually be: “a prophet of the Most High,” going “before the Lord to prepare the way for him,” to proclaim ‘the forgiveness of sins’ and affirm ‘the tender mercies of God.’

Now, we don’t have to go far into the Gospels to find that this is exactly what John did. Jesus, in fact, would later call John ‘the greatest prophet of all.’ John came to pave the way for Jesus, to prepare the hearts of the people to hear the message of salvation, to help them to be open to what God wanted to do in their lives.

Have you ever thought about the fact that in doing this, John set an example for us—that what John did back then is also our mission today!?!

As followers of Christ, we’re called to prepare the Lord’s way—into our own lives, and also into the lives of those who don’t know Him, who’ve never received Him as Savior. We’re also preparers of the Lord’s way.

How do we do this? Well, Zechariah said that John would “give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God...”

That’s it. We simply let people who are burdened with sin know that there’s a merciful God who forgives.

Of course, many don't know what those terms mean today—sin, forgiveness, and salvation. But that was true in John's day too. Lots of folks thought of salvation only in political terms—just kick out the Romans and put the Jews back in charge. They were only looking for a political savior.

I've got some news for you, friends—we still do that! Even some folks who claim Jesus as Savior—if we examine their lives and words, it sure seems like they're looking for some political leader to save them. They're much better evangelists for their politics than their faith!

And if not politics, then perhaps economics. Or their travel agents or life coaches or academic degrees--you name it—this can be anyone or anything that promises to deliver us from life as it is!

John simply let people know that the problem wasn't "out there" somewhere—the problem's "in here." It's in my heart and yours.

Jesus came to deliver us from the enemy within. John came first, though, to prepare Jesus' way—to lay a foundation in people's hearts so that Jesus could then finish the job.

So out by the Jordan River, John announced God's forgiveness for those who repent. They called him "The Baptist" because people who responded to his message were dipped beneath the water as a reminder of how God had washed away their sins.

This hasn't changed. It's still the way we make room for Christ—confessing our sin, embracing the better way to live that our Lord shows us, and being baptized as an expression of what we believe.

Then we seek to live our lives before others in such a way that when we have the privilege of sharing this Gospel with them, they'll reckon that what we say is believable—because they are witnesses to the difference Jesus Christ makes in us.

John the Baptist's work is also ours. We share the good news of God's forgiving love. We live the good news by serving and forgiving others and finding ways to reconcile those who are estranged, whether from God, from other people, or usually both. It's what we're here for, friends—to prepare the Lord's way.

Well, before old Zechariah finished speaking, he mentioned that other Christmas baby. He spoke of the One for whom the season is named. Listen to how he describes Jesus, the soon-to-be-born Savior (vv. 78b-79):

“the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

We began this service by lighting the Peace Candle on our beautiful Advent Wreath. When Zechariah speaks of Jesus, he uses the language of light and peace: light for “those living in darkness and in the shadow of death...”

And what does this light do? It “...guides our feet into the path of peace.”

This is what we want friends: peace! Whether or not we know what to call it, peace is what we all need. Zechariah was pointing us to the Savior, Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace—the only source of true and lasting peace for our lives and our world.

We sang about it earlier: peace--yes, even here in this dark and war-torn world. Henry Longfellow described it as a place where “hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.” We’re constantly reminded of this sad fact of life.

But peace is possible—even in a world like this. And as Christmas approaches, we’re called on to be still enough, for long enough, to remember that “God is not dead, nor doth He sleep.”

John announced it, and Jesus will make sure it ultimately comes true...that “the wrong shall fail and the right prevail with peace on earth, good will to men.”

Old Zechariah was right! Jesus came “to guide our feet into the path of peace”: peace with God, peace within ourselves, and peace with one another.

Is this the path you’re on today? Are you making any progress along this path of peace?

Does the peace of Christ abide in you? And if it does, are you living today as an instrument of His peace?