

Through Zechariah

What God Said About Christmas:

Luke 1:67-79
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Suzie was excited about her new baby brother. Her dad had brought her to the hospital after Sunday School and worship to see him for the first time. She looked at him lovingly and then asked, “Mom, when will he talk?” “Not for a long time,” Mom answered. Suzie persisted, “Yes, but when?” “Well,” Mom answered, “not for a year or so.” “That’s funny,” answered Suzie. “Mrs. Anderson read from the Bible this morning that Job cursed the day of his birth.”

I don’t think Suzie understood that passage of Scripture. Similarly, I don’t think we understand clearly what God said about Christmas. Last week, we discovered through the words of a 16-year-old peasant girl named Mary that God was saying and doing a whole lot more than just visiting this planet or encouraging a culture of giving. God notices individuals; his love does not cool nor does his activity slow from one generation to the next; and he remembers and keeps his promises. Christmas calls us to wake up and see God’s activity now.

God emphasized that truth through his dealings with Zechariah. Zechariah was a priest in Jerusalem. Zechariah and his wife were notable in two ways:

Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years. (Luke 1:6, NIV)

They were fully submitted to God; but they were also disappointed. They were now old and had accommodated themselves to not having children. It was a keen disappointment, but they were now in the routine of living with this unfulfilled hope.

Most of us have unmet expectations and unfulfilled dreams. After a time, we settle into a routine with lower expectations. In truth, unmet expectations create havoc in our lives. All of our anger, disappointment, and discouragement come from unmet expectations. Every broken relationship results in part from unmet expectations. Then we become afraid to expect too much. We don't want our hopes dashed, so we reject any promise of more.

That has been the chief objection expressed to me about healing ministry. Individuals have been afraid that all this talk about divine healing will lead to more disappointment and disillusionment. It is exactly that fear that silences those who have experienced healing. Two weeks ago, a Rochester woman was looking toward surgery because of her worsening scoliosis. She was prayed for right here at Bethany, and the deteriorating curvature of her spine was reversed. The doctor cancelled talk of any surgery and shrugged his shoulders when it came to explaining her improved condition. The woman's husband searched her medical records and found that the measurements on her back matched what her condition was like some thirty years ago before much of the deterioration. The woman also found that many friends did not greet her testimony with excitement. She is eager to share her experience with those who believe in healing; but she finds herself silent with others. Isn't it ironic that when the angel greeted Zechariah and spoke of the new baby – John the Baptist and when Zechariah went into this defense mechanism to shield himself from unfulfilled hopes, the angel made him go silent? What do you suppose God was signaling? We find out when Zechariah spoke for the first time after the birth of John. Zechariah prophesied:

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 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago). (Luke 1:68-70, NIV)

Zechariah spoke of God's visitation. Zechariah said that God has come and has redeemed his people. Now, Jesus was not yet born. John the Baptist was only 8 days old. The cross was in the future, and so was our redemption. How then could God have Zechariah speak as if our redemption was in the past? Many prophecies use past tense to describe events about to be fulfilled. Their past-tense voice signals both the certainty of what is predicted and the truth that God has already decided it. Everything already is motion. Nothing will interfere. Nothing is contingent.

I'm reminded of the advice and challenge Queen Esther received from Mordecai, her older cousin and former guardian. The Jewish people faced elimination because the prime minister of Persia hated them. Esther through a series of events had been elevated to queen; yet to help her people, she would need to violate the royal protocol, interrupt the king and possibly face death. Esther was worried. She had not seen the face of the king for over a month. He might be displeased with her. Her predecessor had been deposed by the king. Listen to the message Mordecai sent Queen Esther:

Don't think for a moment that you will escape there in the palace when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. What's more, who can say but that you have been elevated to the palace for just such a time as this? (Esther 4:13-14, NLT)

Esther had a choice. She could be part of what God was unfolding or she could shrink back in unbelief. Deliverance would come. God's work would be fulfilled; but she would miss the visitation of that deliverance. That is exactly what God was saying about Christmas.

Zechariah prophesied that God had raised up a horn of salvation. People of that time had seen animals fight and win with their horns. They saw the horn as the key to victory. God was giving his people a mighty horn or instrument of deliverance. God was visiting, redeeming and

raising up this instrument of salvation from their oppression. God was also fulfilling the promises he gave long ago to King David and the prophets. God was fulfilling a plan and a promise that he had made long ago.

God spoke about what this salvation in Christmas means. Listen:

Salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us— to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (Luke 1:71-75, NIV)

Who are the enemies that Christmas addresses? Some, who heard Zechariah that day, thought salvation meant deliverance from the control of the Romans. There is an interesting parallel. Nations have always restricted and enslaved those they fear. Today the United States, Russia (and some former Soviet Republics like the Ukraine), Great Britain, France, China, India, Pakistan and Israel have nuclear weapons. These nations fear and are trying to restrict the activity and capability of North Korea and Iran. In fear the Babylonians razed Jerusalem and exiled its leaders and people. In fear, the Egyptians, in the time of Moses, suppressed and enslaved the Israelites. These realities are expressions, like hand in glove, of what is happening spiritually. In the Garden of Eden, God said to serpent:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel. (Genesis 3:15, NIV)

Do you think God was just speaking to a snake and speaking of baby snakes, or do you think God was speaking to the spirit that the snake embodied? Do you think there is enmity between dark angels and humanity and a fear of humanity that results in our temptation, enslavement and destruction? Through Zechariah, God said that Christmas was a rescue mission from the hand of our enemies so that without fear we can serve God and serve before God in holiness and righteousness all our days.

Through Zechariah, God spoke about Christmas. God spoke about his visitation, his redemption of us and also our illumination. Zechariah turned to his 8-day-old baby and said:

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, by which 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. (Luke 1:76-79, NIV)

Last month I received an email from my daughter Sarah when her hospital ship arrived in Benin, West Africa. I believe this was the first time the ship had docked in that port and would work with those people. Sarah worked as a triage nurse. She had to quickly assess people's healthcare needs. Sadly, many more people were in line than they could possibly help. For those they turned away from medical help; they had one more thing they could offer: prayer. Non-medical teams prayed for each one who desired help. As tragic as it was to turn people away when you have the ability but not the time to help them, how much worse would it have been had they docked and no one come for help. How terrible would it be for the hospital ship to dock there for three months with the ability to help and heal so many sick, so many lame and so many dying, and no one come? Some how the way must be prepared or the visitation and redemption have no meaning.

Did you know that God has sent me, and he has sent others to prepare his way, so that you won't miss the ship? The truth is that Christmas is still unfolding. God is still visiting this planet. His visitation has expanded because now, through Jesus' blood he has prepared the repentant to be vessels as well as messengers of his visitation and redemption. God is working right now to shine his light in your heart and life so that your steps might find the path to peace.

Are you recognizing God's visitation? Are you experiencing God's redemption? Are you seeing your path to peace?