

Third Sunday of Advent

December 23, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 80: 1-7; Luke 1: 57-80

“Beloved, You Are Light”

Grace and peace to you from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

My nephew and his wife are about to have their first baby. So far, everyone keeps calling the baby, “peanut,” because that is what he looked like on the first sonogram. I trust those two to come up with a much better name for their son when he’s actually born. The most popular names for baby boys in America according to babycenter.com are Jackson, Liam, Noah, Aiden and Caden. Nameberry.com, however, says they are Liam, Noah, Williams, James and Logan. How do parents choose the name for their child? As one prospective parent put it, “A name, after all, sets the stage for a lifetime of interactions, laying the groundwork for how we see ourselves in the world and how we are perceived.”¹

Experts in the field of baby naming warn parents to consider what a baby’s initials will spell out or how the first name sounds with their surname. You don’t want to set up your dear child to be forever teased at school or the frat house. They also suggest you consider whether you want a child’s name or its pronunciation to be so unique that he or she will be forever embarrassed or defensive as others encounter it. Then there is the advice to submit the name you are considering to the “CEO” or “Supreme Court justice” tests. Binky, Bunny, Lucky, Rocket might be cute for a preschooler but will it suit someone trying to climb the corporate ladder or seeking to assume a position of authority? Who knew selecting a child’s name could be so complicated?

It wasn’t quite so complicated in the time of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Usually a Hebrew child was named for a parent. If not, the name was selected for its meaning and what it might say about his or her future. When it came to the child born to Elizabeth and Zechariah, the expectation was that he would be named after his father, Zechariah Jr. After all, both his parents had lineage in the priestly orders. Surely, their baby would follow in his dad’s footsteps. A name that meant “the one whom Yahweh remembers” was a good one for a priest.

The day came for the miracle baby of elderly Elizabeth and Zechariah to be circumcised. The local religious leader was ready to name the baby Zechariah but Elizabeth stopped them. “No; he is to be named John.” Everyone was confused. John is a nice name and all but no one in his family was named John. They turned to Zechariah, still mute after his encounter with an angel in the temple. They looked to him to correct Elizabeth’s claim. Instead, Zechariah wrote, “His name is John,” the name the angel Gabriel told him it was to be nine months ago. John, by the way, means, “God has been gracious.” God had certainly been gracious to this elderly couple. Their son would not be a priest. He would be a prophet, announcing God’s graciousness in Jesus, God’s very self and word made flesh to be among us. Having been silent for nine months, Zechariah has had a long time to pray and consider all that the angel had told him and what it meant. When he was obedient to God’s command and named his son John, Zechariah’s tongue was freed and he bursts with a song of praise and prophecy:

“Blessed be the Lord God Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us.... as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets of old... Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant... that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness.”

I imagine, he then looked in the face of his newborn son, “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.” Whether he knew it or not, Zechariah proclaimed that the Savior’s job was not about freeing one nation from the political domination of another nation, as most in Israel had believed would be the Messiah’s purpose. Instead, God was about saving us from a different enemy — the enemy of ourselves and our self-absorbed sinfulness that separates us from God and one another. “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,” Zechariah sings.

This man had lived with his wife in the sorrow and shame of being childless. They had not only been near death because of their age, but they were about to disappear from history with no one to carry on their family line or memory. Yet here

“Zechariah, the father, stood tenderly holding his child and realized that God the Father loves His people with even more tenderness, a tender mercy which shines down upon them from the rising Sun of salvation. [It is a mercy that] “is true and complete salvation.”²

This Advent we have been considering our journey toward the Light that is Jesus, the light that no darkness can overcome. “Because Jesus came into the world and shined upon it, you and I need not fear our worst enemies, all our sins and failures. Our future horizon is not clouded by dark wrath. When we seek God we see light breaking on us. In Jesus Christ, there is forgiveness. Jesus is our horn of salvation, our mighty Savior, whose greatest strength is His tender mercy. God’s tender mercy is meant to make us people who make the world safer, happier and more free. Because we have received mercy, we are merciful to needy people, even to enemies. God rescues us from our sins as He rescued [ancient] Israel from her enemies, so that we may serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness.” The mercy of God in Jesus not only offers forgiveness for how we’ve lived in the past, it changes the way we live in[to] the future.”³ We are loved boundlessly and forever by our Lord. Through Jesus, God’s light shone into our dark world and souls, “we are shown mercy and forgiveness so we are free to “serve our God best with a love and mercy [for others] which imitates [God’s own] saving mercy [for us.]”⁴

The “forgiveness, compassion, mercy, peace [Zechariah prophecies in his song are] ...not states of being, but action.”⁵ God shows us how forgiveness, compassion, mercy and peace look and work in Jesus. It is light in the darkness of our world and sin. Forgiveness, compassion, mercy and peace are not passive wishes but “an alternative way of being in the world,⁶” a way of being that is who we are. Whatever names our parents may have chosen for us, we first carry the name “beloved, child of God.” When the good news [that is Jesus] so envelops us through the Holy Spirit, ...we live out these actions [of forgiveness, compassion, mercy and peace] in our daily lives, and form communities characterized by them.”⁷ When we open ourselves to the light and life of Jesus in prayer, scripture, communion, community, and service we grow lives and churches that shine with Christ.”⁸

Even if you “you may be sitting in... the dark of fear or failure or loss of something or someone you love, in God’s tender mercy, the dawn is breaking. This

is the promise and prophecy of which Zechariah sings. God is shining on you and His name is Jesus, [Emmanuel, “God-is-with-you”] Stand up and accept His mercy and walk into His light, letting that mercy shine on through you.” Jesus, the Light of the World came and is coming, “to guide our feet into the way of peace” so that, no matter our parent-given name, we, too, can be light for the world. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 12/22/18

ENDNOTES

1. Karen Pinchin, “Why are we choosing such ridiculous baby names?” Feb 7, 2017 as posted at www.todaysparent.com

2. Stephen S. Bilynskyj, “Mysterious Mercy,” December 6, 2015
<https://valleycovenant.org/podcast/mysterious-mercy-luke-157-80>

3. Ibid

4. libid (adapted)

5. James Hanson, “Commentary on Luke 1:5-13, 57-80: Is God faithful to God’s promises?” As posted at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=257

6. Ibid (adapted)

7. Ibid (adapted)

8. Ibid (adapted)