

Luke 1:68-79

⁶⁸Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has visited us and prepared redemption for his people.
⁶⁹He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰just as he said long ago through the mouth of his holy prophets.
⁷¹He raised up salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us,
⁷²in order to show mercy to our fathers by remembering his holy covenant,
⁷³the oath which he swore to Abraham our father,
⁷⁴to grant deliverance to us from the hand of our enemies,
so that we are able to serve him without fear,
⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
⁷⁶And you, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,
because you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷to give his people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸because of God's tender mercies,
by which the Rising Sun from on high will visit us,
⁷⁹to shine on those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Deliverance

I.

An empty chair at the table and a place setting for the prophet Elijah. Passover was all about deliverance.

The first Passover was deliverance of God's people Israel from the hand of their Egyptian taskmasters. The people had been enslaved there for many years. Moses brought God's directive to Pharaoh: "Let my people go." At the last of God's plagues before Israel left the land of their slavery, God gave instructions for Passover. The Angel of Death would actually pass over the houses of Israelite people, bringing God's judgment only on the Egyptians.

Every year they were to commemorate Passover and remember how God delivered his people from Egypt. In the Promised Land the prophecies continued. It was understood that Passover pointed ahead to another deliverance, a final deliverance. After the days of Elijah, the promise was that a prophet *like* Elijah would come right before God's final deliverance in the promised Messiah.

And so, the empty chair and the place setting for Elijah at every family's Passover table. When he didn't show up, each year the people would say, maybe next year. Maybe next year Elijah will come to signal God's final deliverance.

II.

For centuries the people had been waiting for God's deliverance. Every priest in Judaism was well-versed in the deliverance God promised, and all the prophecies about the One who was coming to bring that deliverance. Deliverance was an important part of their religion.

Even more than the people at their Passover tables, every priest had been waiting his entire life for God to bring the deliverance he had promised. One priest in particular had been waiting with great anticipation.

During his special time of service at the temple in Jerusalem, an angel had appeared to this priest and had given him incredible news—unbelievable news. Zechariah and his wife were going to have a baby. Normally, such news wouldn't be earth-shattering, but the two

of them were past the age when couples could have children.

The angel told him that the son that would be born to his wife, Elizabeth, would: “Turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, to turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to prepare a people who are ready for the Lord” (Luke 1:16-17, EHV).

He couldn’t believe it. Literally. Zechariah doubted what God had told him through the angel. Because he had doubted, he was told: “Now listen, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things happen, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at the proper time” (Luke 1:20, EHV). As soon as the angel made this pronouncement, Zechariah was unable to speak. That reality, perhaps, gave even greater weight in his mind to the rest of the angel’s words.

It was time for Zechariah to prepare. Somehow he made sure his wife, Elizabeth, knew what the angel had said to him. There must have been lots of hand gestures and some scribbled notes.

Then, there were nine months to study. There was urgency in Zechariah’s study now. Always the priesthood understood God’s promised deliverance was coming, but *he* knew now that it was coming very, very soon. It was time to dust off every scroll and read every prophecy about the coming Messiah with fresh eyes.

At last the baby was born. All the relatives and friends wanted to name him after his father, but Elizabeth was insisting on the name “John,” exactly what the angel had told Zechariah to name him. Zechariah confirmed the name “John” by writing it on a tablet.

Luke records, “Immediately Zechariah’s mouth was opened, his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God” (Luke 1:64, EHV).

III.

You might think his first words would be thanking and praising God for deliverance from being unable to speak. Perhaps he would thank God for delivering he and his wife from childlessness. But that wasn’t it.

We read his song a few moments ago. Zechariah’s first words, after nine months of silence, were: “Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited us and prepared redemption for his people. ⁶⁹He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰just as he said long ago through the mouth of his holy prophets” (Luke 1:68-70, EHV).

Again and again God had promised redemption and salvation for his people. The faithful in the land of Judah were still looking for it. So many, however, had secularized God’s promises. They were looking for relief from Roman oppression. They were looking for a return of a physical kingdom of Israel. They were looking for a restoration of the kind of nation they had enjoyed under King David.

Zechariah’s song continued. “He raised up salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, ⁷²in order to show mercy to our fathers by remembering his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath which he swore to Abraham our father, ⁷⁴to grant deliverance to us from the hand of our enemies, so that we are able to serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days” (Luke 1:71-75, EHV).

The deliverance God promised to Abraham was much more than deliverance from earthly enemies. It was much more than establishing an earthly kingdom, as Abraham’s descendants had enjoyed under King David. God’s promise to Abraham was a continuation

of the promise to Adam and Eve, the promise that sin and Satan would be defeated. Along with those defeats came the greatest deliverance of all—deliverance from death.

Did you notice all throughout his song so far how Zechariah spoke about God's plan of salvation? "He *has* raised up, as he said," he said in the first verses of his song. "He raised up," he says here. God's plan was already sure and certain, as far as Zechariah was concerned. When the angel announced that John would be coming, he doubted. But no more; he had experienced the fullness of God's goodness and knew that the salvation God promised was as sure and certain as if it were already completed—as if Jesus had already said from the cross: "It is finished."

IV.

Nine months in silence Zechariah waited to sing this song of praise to God, working on it and composing it.

After nine months of silence, Zechariah's first words in praise to God were words of praise that God's long-promised Messiah was just around the corner. After—and only after—he had praised God for the Christchild, he finally gets around to singing about his own son's part in God's plan.

Gabriel had told Zechariah that John would go before Jesus "in the spirit and power of Elijah." So he sings: "And you, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, because you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷to give his people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸because of God's tender mercies, by which the Rising Sun from on high will visit us, ⁷⁹to shine on those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:76-79, EHV).

John would have a huge part to play in the salvation history. John would prepare the way. John would announce salvation and forgiveness so the people could know of God's tender mercies. John would point to the Rising Sun who would shine on all of us who sit in the darkness of sin and the shadow of death.

How excited Zechariah was to train John and prepare him for his important work of preparing the way for the Savior, who brought deliverance.

V.

Deliverance. Christians don't generally celebrate the Passover. Certainly we don't need the empty chair and place setting for Elijah, since John has already filled that role. Through the season of Advent, we watched and waited with God's people, just like Zechariah did for his nine-month silence.

On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day we celebrated the fact that God sent his Son to bring deliverance for all people. Today is the 12th day of Christmas; the Christmas season ends with today.

Tomorrow Epiphany begins, and we watch through the pages of Scripture as Jesus is revealed to all people. Later will come Lent, and we will walk with our Savior and watch as he makes the journey to the cross to complete the deliverance Zechariah sang about.

We aren't waiting. We are singing. We are singing with Zechariah and every exuberant believer that the Lord's salvation has come. Share the great good news of deliverance in Jesus. Patiently wait for God's time for your final deliverance, when he invites you to your final home with Jesus, who has already gone to prepare your place. Amen.