

Singing the Songs of the Season

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Luke 1.57-80
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I. Connecting With One Another

Think ahead to how you'll celebrate Christmas dinner this year - or back to how you celebrated Thanksgiving a few weeks ago. What preparations had to be made?

How much time was spent preparing food? What kinds of table settings were used? How did you arrange the chairs? Was all that preparation worth it?

II. Introduction to this Study

This Christmas, we're singing the songs of the season, beginning 800 years before Christ's birth and continuing through his presentation at the temple. Last week, we studied Mary's "Magnificat," her jubilant response that God was bringing about His salvation through the miraculous birth of a Son. This week, we'll see how God prepared the way for Jesus' countercultural ministry.

This preparation included not only Mary and Joseph, but also Elizabeth - who gave birth to John the Baptist in her old age - and her husband Zechariah, this week's "singer." At first, Zechariah, who served as a priest who served in the Temple, disbelieved that his prayer "has been heard." Ultimately, however, he prophesied,

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.

III. Study the Text

a. Though we're studying Zechariah's song, it's important to understand the back-story. To do so, read Luke 1.5-25.

What do you find interesting in these verses? Why do you think Zechariah is rendered unable to speak after his disbelief? Why do you think Luke keeps switching back and forth between the prophecies and birth accounts of John and Jesus?

b. Read Luke 1.57-66. In first century Jewish culture, children were commonly - if not always - named after a relative. In this instance, friends and neighbors assume Elizabeth's child will be named after his father, most likely because of the ailment which had prevented him from verbal communication for the previous 9+ months. As such, her protest and offering of the name "John" is very rare.

One scholar notes, "Only a name outside the range of all expectation can do justice to the decisive discontinuity in human affairs marked by John's coming." Though names aren't as integral to our culture, how do we mark "decisive discontinuity in human affairs"?

c. The name Zechariah means, "God remembers." John, on the other hand, means "God is gracious," "God is generous," or "God has shown favor." How does knowing the meaning behind these names help you understand what's going on in this story? Or, to ask it another way, why do you think Luke is sure to include the debate over the name in his gospel account?

d. Recall that Zechariah was unable to speak because he disbelieved the good news (the word for good news here is a derivative of "gospel"). What, then, is the significance that Zechariah's

mouth is again "opened" after he writes that his child's name is John? Could we say that he then "believed the good news"? Or that it was proven to him?

e. In verses 65-66, we read that the neighbors were "filled with awe" and were talking about "all these things," asking "What then is this child going to be?" Imagine, for a moment, you were one of those neighbors, what would pique your interest in this story?

f. Read verses 67-75. Like his wife Elizabeth in verse 41, notice that Zechariah sings this song only *after* he is filled with the Holy Spirit. As we saw last week, Luke regularly points this out in his second volume, Acts, as well. But he's not alone!

Notice that the Apostle Paul even says no one can assert "Jesus is Lord" without the Spirit in 1st Corinthians 12.1-11. And these are connected to spiritual gifts! In what ways have you seen the Spirit's work in your life leading you to not only sing the songs of the season, but also use your gifts "for the common good"?

g. Scholars point out that in verses 68-75 Zechariah sings of what God is saving His people *from*, while in 76-79 he sings about what God is saving His people *into*. How many can you find in each "category"?

What God is saving us *from*:

What God is saving us *into*:

h. Notice that throughout the entirety of Zechariah's song he connects his son's future ministry of preparation with how God prepared the way in the past, singing of "the God of Israel," "servant David," "Father Abraham," and "holy covenant."

Why would these terms be important to the original readers of Luke's gospel? What can we learn from Zechariah's use of these words?

IV. Reflect and Respond

a. Have you ever been rendered "speechless"? If so, why? When you were again able to speak, did you praise God?

b. In the names of Zechariah and John, we learn that God both remembers and is gracious. How does that transform our experience of Christmas from how our surrounding culture views it?

c. How have you affirmed the good news in writing or in speech? Are there ways you could do so this Christmas season so that your family and neighbors might also be "filled with awe"?

d. How could you use your spiritual gifts "for the common good" this Christmas season?

e. What do you need to be saved from this Christmas? How does that relate to what - or Who - you need to be saved to?

V. Pray

Spend some time in prayer:

a. Lift up the mission and ministry of Good Shepherd, that we continue to make disciples of all ages as we connect with God, grow in faith and serve in love;

b. Pray for all those who will visit Good Shepherd and other Christian churches this Christmas season, that they be filled with awe as they are filled by God's Holy Spirit, that they rejoice not in presents, but in God's presence, and that they accept the salvation of the "rising Sun who has come to us from heaven," Jesus the Messiah.