

December 11, 2016 Temple Baptist Church, Jamestown, ND

TITLE: (NO) HELP FOR CHRIST(MAS), Luke 1:67-80 (*Christmas in a Strange Land #3*)

Christmas is a time of increased activity: gift buying, decorating, cooking and baking, participating in extra events. What are some ways in which you could use and are willing to receive help? (Audience)

In our series *Christmas in a Strange Land* we've been approaching Advent from the perspective of the changes in our culture which have led to many of us feeling like strangers or exiles in our own land.

That sense is what many of God's people felt as they were under the domination of Rome, had not heard formally from God through a prophet in over four centuries, while holding onto the hope of previous prophets.

Today we focus on the example and words of Zechariah in Luke 1 to frame our thinking about **the help we need and the help we have this Christmas**.

The elderly priest Zechariah is in Jerusalem doing his two-week service at the Temple, kind of like a Reservist or Guard member. During that yearly service Zechariah is chosen for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to offer the incense for the evening prayer.

What happens next? (Audience) Sees an angel. Prayers answered. Elizabeth will conceive and have a son. Read Luke 1:15-25. It is not only that Zechariah cannot speak. He also cannot hear. Nine plus months later we read: Read Luke 1:57-66. What would you do if couldn't speak or hear for nine months?

**Zechariah's not being able to speak is not merely a sign of his disbelief, it is meant as a sign to the people of how special is the child whom Elizabeth will bear.** When Zechariah's tongue is loosed, he bursts forth from the exile of his muteness and deafness.

Let's read the words together. Read Luke 1:67-80. The angel Gabriel said that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit. Over six months later when Mary visits Elizabeth, we read that John is filled with the Holy Spirit, which leads to Elizabeth's filling (1:41-45). Now Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit. In each instance **the filling leads to insight of God's activity through Messiah and words of praise for it.**

**What kind of help could you use this Christmas?** God . . .

- Remembers a promise. (1:72-73)

My forgetting seems to increase with the number of my days. But God does not forget. Two millennia earlier He chose an elderly childless couple to be the beginning of a special people. God promised to bless Abram, giving him a family innumerable like the

stars and sand. God changed his name to Abraham, *father of many*, and gave him the sign of circumcision. **The people Abraham would father would be known as God's people, all for the sake of bringing in others, the nations, to also become God's people through the ultimate Seed of Abraham.**

When Zechariah says in verses 72 and 73 that God remembers this holy covenant, this oath, to Abraham and His promise of mercy, what he is saying is that God has not forgotten that Israel is His people. **His mercy references His faithfulness, His steadfast love, His loyalty**, as the OT word is variously translated.

Another way of saying this is that **God has not forgotten to be their God, even though Israel purposely wandered away from Him.** They have waited as a people for four centuries. They have been in mourning, confessing their sin of unfaithfulness.

All Zechariah's words are based in the OT, words which would be familiar to the people. For example Psalm 106 says, *Nevertheless, he looked upon their distress, when he heard their cry. For their sake he remembered his covenant, and relented according to the abundance of his steadfast love.* Psalm 106:44-45

**John's birth is a sign that God has remembered, and His remembering means that His mercy, His faithful love will be demonstrated.** God's bringing John means that He is going to be doing something big.

Because of the increase of activity during this season we can forget things, even people for whom we care. God remembers those who are His . . . and if He remembers He promises to help with our true needs. Question. **How can you and I remember Him and His promise?** (Audience) God . . .

- Visits to redeem. (1:68)

The evidence that God remembers is that He visits His people. How did He demonstrate this? (Audience) Gabriel's visits to Zechariah and Mary (and Joseph, Matthew 1). Zechariah's not being able to speak and hear. Elizabeth's first pregnancy in her old age. Both Elizabeth and Zechariah's insistence that the child be named John, even though Zechariah could not possibly have heard the peoples' interaction with Elizabeth. The loosing of Zechariah's tongue, his praises to God, the words he uses of his son and his role in fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy of preparing people for the LORD's coming.

God's visit is to redeem, to buy back His people from those who have literally taken them, abused them, even prevented them from serving Him properly. **God's remembering leads to His visiting: good news for those who serve Him as His people and bad news for those who do not.**

The word *redemption* could be used to bring someone literally out of slavery through human trafficking. Redemption is required for someone enslaved to a chemical or

behavioral addiction. Redemption is appropriate for those who cannot provide financially for true needs. Redemption is needed for those in abusive relationships. You and I may not think that we can provide that kind of redemption, but as with God's redemption it begins with a visit. **Is there someone whom you could visit this Advent season, whom your visit could be the beginning of God's redemption for them? List a name.** God . . .

- Saves that we may serve. (1:69, 71, 74-75)

Remembering → Visiting → Saving. Verse 69 continues the thought of God's visit leading to His redemption. He accomplishes this through *raising up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David*.

*The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.* Psalm 18:2 This is a psalm of David, while the later part of verse 69 is a reference to the promise the LORD makes to David in 2 Samuel 7 of Messiah.

Verse 71 seems, once again, to be influenced by Psalm 18 (this time, verse 17). The theme of our being *saved from our enemies* continues in verses 74 and 75, this time worded as *being delivered from the hand of our enemies*. But what is the reason for our deliverance (vs. 74)? (Audience) That we serve God without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.

We no longer need fear our enemies so we can serve the Lord. **Our serving Him, though in reverence, should be full of joy from lives that are set apart to Him doing that which is right.** We serve with the understanding that He sees us, i. e. we are *before Him*, but we don't fear Him. Rather, we are wholeheartedly devoted to Him in all we do.

Remembering → Visiting → Saving → Serving. Serving isn't just for priests or people associated with religious practices. We serve Him in shoveling and moving snow. We serve Him while cleaning bathrooms. We serve Him while caring for others, including children and the elderly. We serve Him while we are driving. We serve Him during our times of leisure. We serve Him in our waking and in our sleeping. (Paul – Colossians 3, *Whatever we do in word or deed . . .*) **We are saved to serve.**

What are some other ways we serve? (Audience) **What way could you serve the Lord by helping someone in the next three weeks?** God . . .

- Gives light and guides us. (1:76-79)

Verses 76-79 speak of the specific prophecy regarding Zechariah's 8-day old son John. He is a prophet of the Most High, whose purpose is to prepare the Lord's way, a clear reference to Isaiah's words in 40:3. John's method would be to **preach about salvation and the link with forgiveness of sins.** God and only God can forgive sins,

which then leads to our salvation, our deliverance, not just from our enemies, but from the effects of our sin. **Our part is to acknowledge our sin, our need for God, His sufficiency and repent.**

This is called the *tender mercy of God*. God's rising (sunrise in ESV) visits *to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death*. This, too, is a clear reference to Isaiah's prophecy in chapter 9, "*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.*" Isaiah 9:2

This One for Whom John prepares His way is the One Who will *guide out feet into the way of peace.*" (cf. Isaiah 9:6). **This peace begins first with God and then extends to others as we learn to walk in His way, as we learn to walk with Him.**

**The lights at Advent remind us that Jesus is God's light to all who are in darkness, beginning with the person we see in the mirror.**

Question. **Have you responded in repentance and faith to the One Who is the light? How are you preparing the way through your words and life so that others come to see and know Jesus?**

Conclusion. I want to return where we began. What went through Zechariah's mind during those months as he could not speak or even hear? Did he replay the words of Gabriel over and over in his mind? Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were noted as devout followers of the Lord. Yet each had to grow in his/her own way to receive what God was going to give them.

Each week we've emphasized a practice to help in our own exile. Week one the practice was to mourn. Last week we were invited to confess sin to another, not so much our sin against that person, but to practice confessing to another so that the grip caused by hiding is broken. This week I invite you to listen. **What help do we truly need from Christ this Advent? How are we seeking and trusting that He will provide?** Please listen two ways. Take some time to listen to the Lord. Use today's verses if you like. Second, take some time to listen to another. Simply be there for them. You may be God's way of providing help, the very gift they need. (Pray)

NEXT STEPS: Read the text with another three times aloud, slowly. Take some time to listen. Share where God seems to be prompting you. Review the outline. What question seems to be the most important for you right now? Listen to each other. Is there another to whom you could listen this week? Pray for each other. Next week is the Children's Christmas Program. Prepare for worship Dec. 25 by reading Luke 2.